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THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE SEAMSTRESS," "THE BRONZE STATUE," "FAUST," "THE NECROMANCER," "THE MASSACRE OF GLENCOE." "POPE JOAN," "THE PIXY," "ROBERT MACAIRE," "MARY PRICE," "THE DAYS OF HOGARTH." "KENNETH," "WAGNER THE WEHR-WOLF," "THE SOLDIER'S WIFE," "THE RYE HOUSE PLOT," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "JOSEPH WILMOT," "MAY MIDDLETON." "ROSA LAMBERT," "LOUISA THE ORPHAN," "THE MODERN LITERATURE OF FRANCE." "PICKWICK ABROAD," "THE LOVES OF THE HAREM," "OMAR: A TALE OF THE WAR," ETC, ETC.

WITH FIFTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS,

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THE
MYSTERIES OF THE COURT.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE SELF-SACRIFICE DEMANDED.

We must now return to the Countess of Lascelles. She had retired to her own chamber shortly after Adolphus conducted the lawyer from the library to the room in which the old Earl had met his death and where his murderer was unmasked in the manner already described. It was understood that if Mr. Slater was successful in the aim which had induced him to take up his quarters in that chamber, he was to ring the bell continuously and violently, not merely as a summons for the household, but likewise as a signal that he had succeeded.

On retiring to her chamber, the Countess of Lascelles did not begin to disapparel herself: she had not the slightest inclination for slumber—her mind was agitated with a variety of conflicting feelings. Great was her suspense in respect to the issue of Mr. Slater's experiment: for it was absolutely necessary to combine all possible evidences in order to bring the foul deed completely home to the assassin. She endeavoured to compose herself as much as she was able, and to steady the beatings of her fluttering heart as well as the throbbings of her brain: but these were indeed no easy tasks; and instead of sitting down tranquilly to await the signal so earnestly hoped for, she paced the chamber with quick uneven steps. Nevertheless, very different indeed was Ethel's present state of mind from what it had recently been when she had so confidently but loathingly regarded Adolphus as a murderer, and when day after day she was plunged into utter bewilderment or excited to the liveliest indignation on hearing herself denounced as a murderess. Yes: now that the horrible mystery had been so far cleared up, a tremendous weight was lifted from her mind; but still there was much yet to be done—and even when all this should have been accomplished, might Ethel ever hope for the enjoyment of happiness again?

Every now and then she stopped short in her agitated walk—and listened. Surely she had heard the bell? surely it was tingling in her ear? surely its vibrating sounds reached her from the distance where it hung? No—it was mere fancy on her part: all was in reality still: it was only that half-singing, half-droning sound which the ear perceives when the blood mounts up into the excited brain. But hark! *now* indeed the bell rings!—the sound is unmistakable—it peals with a violence that reverberates through the mansion——it is the signal of the lawyer's success, and Makepeace is unmasked!

Ethel's first impulse was to rush from the room and repair to the chamber where the scene announced by that signal was taking place: she felt an almost irresistible anxiety to assure herself that the detection of Makepeace was indeed complete, and that to no other or unforeseen circumstance was to be attributed the ringing of that bell. But all in a moment a fearful apprehension seized upon her—the apprehension lest Makepeace should proclaim her past amour with Adolphus. Her guilty conscience in this respect gave to her alarm the strength and potency of an absolute certainty that what she dreaded could not fail to occur; and thus she no sooner found herself relieved from one source of deepest anxiety, than she had to encounter another. She remained in her room a prey to the most fearful suspense.

All of a sudden one of her maids rushed in half-dressed, exclaiming, "O my lady! my lady! the assassin is discovered!—it is Makepeace!"

"I had foreseen it—I knew that it would be so," responded Ethel, much excited: "it was for this reason that Mr. Slater came to the house——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the maid: and then she at once comprehended how it was that her mistress had not as yet retired to rest.

"I will go to the drawing-room," said the Countess: "I must hear all particulars—I am full of suspense and anxiety——"

"Suspense and anxiety, my lady?" cried the maid, somewhat in astonishment. "Why, the murderer is discovered!—it turns out to be that infamous hypocrite Makepeace who went on so at the time about his poor dear lord——"

"I will go to the drawing-room, I tell you," interrupted Ethel still more impatiently: "and do you request his lordship the Earl—or Mr. Slater——his lordship will perhaps be better——to come to me there as soon as possible. Go quick, girl, quick!"

Ethel was very much excited, as the reader may judge from her unguarded as well as broken sentences; and the maid, at first astonished, came to the very natural conclusion that the excitement of all these proceedings had produced a somewhat hysterical effect upon her mistress. She therefore hastened away to do her ladyship's bidding: and returning to the vicinage of the deceased Earl's chamber, she reached the dressing-room door just as Makepeace was proclaiming the illicit loves of Ethel and Adolphus. The maid—who was a pure-minded, artless, inexperienced girl enough, and who had never previously suspected that which she now heard—was transfixed with a stupefying consternation. In a few moments, however, she heard the footsteps of Mr. Slater and the two domestics who had accompanied him, descending the upper flight after their successful search for the crock of gold: and the maid, not choosing to be deemed a listener there, hurried away.

But she had not acquitted herself of the mission she had received from Ethel; and when the next minute she thought of it, events were hurrying on with too much rapidity to furnish an immediate opportunity for the delivery of her ladyship's message either to Mr. Slater or the Earl of Lascelles. The officers of justice were coming to take the murderer into custody. Again was the tale of the illicit amour vociferously proclaimed—Makepeace was borne off—some of the domestics dispersed to their own chambers—others continued grouped together upon the landing outside the dressing-room door, to discuss the fearfully exciting incidents which had just occurred—and the lawyer, deeming it better to leave the young Earl to himself after the overwhelming exposure, retired to a bed-chamber—where, however, as the reader has seen, he was presently aroused to receive the confession of the murderer at the neighbouring station-house.

Adolphus had tarried behind in the fatal chamber where the late Earl had met his death, and whence the assassin had just been borne off in the custody of the officers of justice. The unhappy young man threw himself upon his knees by the side of that couch—buried his face in his hands—and sobbed audibly. What was to become of Ethel?—how would he himself ever be able to look the world in the face? His position was fearful: it was only just a single shade better than it recently was when subject to the extortionate demands of Makepeace on the one hand and to the accusations levelled against him by the Countess on the other.

Meanwhile the young maid-servant had retreated into a room on the same landing, in the hope of finding an opportunity to deliver Ethel's message to Adolphus, whom she had not as yet seen emerge from the fatal chamber. She kept the door ajar in the room to which she had thus retreated, and watched for his appearance. Several minutes elapsed; and at length she heard footsteps. She beheld the young Earl come forth: a light that was burning in the passage, threw its beams upon his countenance; and the damsel felt her blood run cold as she saw how ghastly pale and how convulsed it was. She scarcely dared issue from the room to deliver the message; and yet she felt that under existing circumstances it was one which she ought not to keep back; for after such a frightful exposure the Countess and Adolphus might indeed have much to deliberate upon—and that speedily too. Accordingly, mustering all her courage, the lady's-maid came forth, and said to the Earl, "My lord, her ladyship bade me inform you that she is in the drawing-room, and desires to see your lordship before you retire to your own chamber."

"Which drawing-room?" asked Adolphus, in a voice so deep and hollow that it made the girl recoil as if from the presence of an animated corpse.

"In the Red Drawing-room, my lord," she answered, regaining with a mighty effort a sufficiency of self-possession for the purpose.

She then fled away to her own chamber; and Adolphus proceeded to the Red Drawing-room, saying within himself, "Everything must be revealed to Ethel—it will be useless for me to conceal it—all the domestics would show her by their manner to-morrow that the terrible truth has been proclaimed. Good God! what will become of us both?—what will become of us?"

He entered the drawing-room; and as he appeared in the presence of Ethel, she was instantaneously struck by his worn, haggard, ghastly countenance,—a countenance which bespoke a thousand crushing evils; so that all her worst apprehensions were confirmed in an instant. He did not immediately speak—but fixed his eyes upon her: they had a hollow look—and, Oh! what a world of care was in their gaze!

"I understand you but too well, Adolphus," said the unhappy Countess, looking upon him with a gaze which in its expression was awfully akin to his own. "No sooner have circumstances emptied our cup of misery which was filled to the brim, than it is replenished to overflowing:"—then, after some deep guttural sounds, as if the words stuck in her throat, she added, "Makepeace has proclaimed everything—is it not so?"

"It is," he replied. "The miscreant has resolved that in *his* death would he do that which should embitter *our* lives until the end!"

"And the domestics," said the Countess,—"they now know everything?"

"Everything!" responded Adolphus. "Just heaven, it is frightful!"

"Frightful!" echoed the miserable lady: and turning aside for a few moments, she covered her face with her hands, her fingers pressing tight against her throbbing brows: but no tears trickled between those fingers—her's was now a despair too deep to find a relief in weeping. At length, as a thought suddenly struck her, she removed her hands from her face—and turning towards Adolphus, said, "It is now for you to do that which will materially alter our position before the world—and if not lift the branding disgrace completely from us, at all events divest it of its deepest shade of blackness."

"Good heavens! what mean you, Ethel?" exclaimed the young Earl, starting with sudden affright: for though he put this question, yet was he little at a loss to comprehend the significancy of her words.

"Adolphus, you *do* understand me," she answered, at once fathoming all he thought and felt; "and it is most ungenerous of you not to proclaim without an instant's delay that everything which you can do shall be done!"

"Ethel, Ethel!" gasped the young Earl: and he could say no more—but sinking on a seat, he gazed in consternation upon her.

"Is it possible, Adolphus, that you do not understand what I mean?" she asked: "will you thus force me to explain in the most measured terms of language? Well, then, be it so! The world," continued Ethel impressively, "believes that you are the son of the late Earl of Lascelles—and therefore that I am your step-mother. With such a belief our unfortunate love, when proclaimed, will be regarded as infamy itself: for what, Adolphus, could be more horrible than an amour of so incestuous a dye? Society will drive me with execration from its midst—yourself with scorn and loathing. Is all this to be, when one word spoken from your lips will in a moment reduce our tremendous crime, as it now appears, to a comparatively venial feeling? And that word must be spoken by your lips, Adolphus: it is the sacrifice which you must make for both our sakes. Oh, even then there will yet remain degradation enough for me——but spare me, Adolphus, that branding shame—that crowning infamy!"

"Ethel," responded the young Earl, in the same deep hollow voice as before, "you know not what you ask. You bid me divest myself of my patrician rank—to pluck the coronet from my brow—to resign the broad domains which call me master—to sink into an obscurity which will be total, like a star that goes out—and what is perhaps worse, to find myself plunged into comparative poverty!"

"I have a rich jointure, Adolphus," answered the Countess, with difficulty repressing a look of scorn and contempt at the objections which he proffered: "take it all—I abandon it to you, every shilling—I myself care not for poverty! But as for your title, you must resign it!"

"Never!" ejaculated the young Earl, goaded almost to madness by the thought.

"And yet there was a time, Adolphus," rejoined Ethel, reproachfully, "when I believed that for my sake you would have abandoned rank—position—everything——"

"Oh, but the madness of that love has passed, Ethel—and not only with myself," cried the young Earl, "but also with you! I cannot do it. To resign a proud title—an immense domain——No, no, I cannot!"

"Coward!" ejaculated the indignant lady; "you cared not to sacrifice me to your passion—but you recoil from the consequences! Did I not exert all my energies to remain virtuous? And was it not your incessant importunity — your frenzied entreaty—yes, even your threat of suicide which dragged me down into the abyss? And now you refuse to proclaim the word which is to mitigate the dark aspect of our iniquity! Why, insensate that you are, *you* would in reality be a greater gainer than I: for how will the matter stand if you act as you ought to do? You are not the son of the late Earl of Lascelles: not one drop of his blood flows in your veins; and therefore no more discredit will attach to you for having intrigued with the Countess of Lascelles, than ever does attach itself to a man who indulges in an affair of gallantry. You will not be spurned by the world—you may still lift your head high. But how different will it be with *me!*—for though relieved from the darkest stain of the stigma, yet enough of its hue will rest upon me to stamp me as a fallen woman. Now then, sir, what is your decision?"

There was so much determination in the words, looks, and manner of the Countess of Lascelles, that Adolphus was smitten with a renewed consternation; and his dismayed looks were riveted upon the Countess. At length, as a sudden idea struck him, he sprang up from his seat, exclaiming, "Let us defy the world, Ethel!—let us set its opinion at naught! Let us dwell together—let us give back to each other all that love which we formerly cherished——"

"Never!" she ejaculated: and her eyes flashed sudden fire. "Never, Adolphus—never! The past has been fraught with guilt enough for us both—or at last for *me*: the future shall be stainless——it is impossible I could sin again!"

"But marriage, Ethel——"

"Marriage?" she shrieked forth. "What! while the world believes that you were indeed the son of my late husband? Oh," she added, with the blighting, withering laugh of utter scorn, "to what wretched expedients is your fevered imagination reducing you?"

"Ethel, you may say and do what you like," exclaimed the young Earl—"but you cannot force me——"

"Cannot force you?" she interrupted him. "And what if I myself proclaim the truth? What if I declare——"

"Who will believe you, Ethel?" interrupted Adolphus. "What would my answer be? That it was a tale devised by an unhappy woman, goaded almost to frenzy by her position—a tale devised for the purpose of palliating her fault before the world——"

"And you would do all this, Adolphus?" said the Countess, gazing upon him with an expression so strange, so wild, so sinister, that when he thought of it afterwards, he could not possibly fathom what its precise meaning might have been.

He did not immediately give any answer. Though in one sense he felt his position to be a tolerably strong one so far as the revelation of the secret of his birth might be concerned, yet on the other hand, he was far from being at his ease in respect to a woman who in the present as well as in recent circumstances, had displayed a mental energy, a resoluteness, a determination of which she had seemed incapable in those times when she was the soft, the tender, the yielding, fond partner of his guilty love. He therefore saw that everything must be done to conciliate or appease the Countess, if possible, short of the absolute concession of that which she had demanded; and his ideas remained fixed upon the project of defying the world and its opinions—of making her his mistress again—or even of marrying her if she thought fit—anything, in a word, so long as he might place a seal upon her lips with regard to the *one* tremendous secret that might give him much trouble and annoyance, even if it did not ultimately tear him down altogether from the pedestal of rank and fortune.

While these reflections were passing through the mind of Adolphus, Ethel had turned aside, and was again meditating profoundly. Her countenance was of the most ashy pallor—her features were rigid: a sinister light burnt steadily in those eyes that had once beamed only with love and tenderness: the bosom which had been wont to palpitate with the softest and most voluptuous sensations, was now upheaved and perfectly still: she was motionless as a statue—but all that was passing within rendered her very different indeed from the sculptured marble's inanimation. Adolphus regarded her with a furtive and uneasy look; and when she at length turned again towards him, he gave a sudden start in evident apprehension that this terrible conflict of words and feelings was to be renewed.

"We have said enough for the present," observed the Countess, in a voice of such cold monotony that it afforded not the slightest indication to whatsoever might be passing in her mind. "Let us separate for a few hours—to rest, if we can—but at all events let us separate. We shall find an opportunity of speaking to each other again; it must be soon—we will make up our minds how to act—and perhaps—perhaps," she added, her accents now becoming tremulous, and her features relaxing from their rigidity—"perhaps, Adolphus, we must make mutual concessions, so that we may have a due regard for all that has taken place between us, and for all that we may now best do in the interest of us both."

"Ethel—dear Ethel!" exclaimed the young Earl, scarcely believing his own senses; "you are becoming yourself again! Heaven be thanked that you now speak thus rationally!"

"Let us separate, Adolphus," she said, in a still milder tone than that in which she had just spoken; "and it may be that when the storm of excitement is completely passed, and our senses are rescued from the consternation and bewilderment in which they have been lately plunged, we may yet show each other that we are not utterly selfish!"

In the exuberance of the hopeful feelings thus suddenly conjured up in the soul of Adolphus, he seized the hand of the Countess and pressed it to his lips. She snatched it away—but not with any particular violence; and the next instant hurried from the room.

It was about an hour afterwards that the messenger came from the station-house to fetch Mr. Slater to receive the confession of Makepeace; and as neither Adolphus nor Ethel knew that he was thus summoned—for in their respective chambers they heard not the ringing of the gate-bell—the lawyer bade the domestic who had risen to answer that summons, forbear from disturbing his master and the Countess as they must have need of rest. On his return to the mansion, the solicitor sought his couch again: but when he arose at about eight in the morning, it was to receive the intelligence that the murderer had committed suicide in his cell. Then was it announced by a valet to Adolphus, and by one of her maids to Ethel, that during the past night Makepeace had delivered a full confession of his crime, and that a few hours later he had perished by his own hand.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

BLOOMFIELD.

It was eleven in the forenoon: Mr. Slater had taken his departure; and Ethel, who had not dedescended to the breakfast-table, sent an intimation to Adolphus that she would join him in a few minutes in the library. The young Earl proceeded thither to await her coming; and as he paced to and fro with a certain degree of suspense, the following reflections passed through his mind:—

"Now is the crisis of this new phase in my fortunes! Will she yield? or is the warfare to be renewed? Anguish renders the soul capricious: and the mood may have changed again. If so, I must meet her valorously and resolutely. But no!—she will be reasonable: she saw last night that I was determined—and she altered visibly at the close of our interview. Why should she not agree with me to defy the world? Wealth procures pleasures that will enable us to live in enjoyment away from that society which banishes us. To love her again——No, that is impossible! The freshness—the enthusiasm—the glow of that love of mine, are gone for ever:—I feel, I feel that I am an altered man! But to toy with her as a mistress—or to endure her as a wife——Yes, yes—this is possible!—this is easy indeed!—and it may even be happiness, since it will put an end to strife—it will relieve me from apprehension—it will rescue me from a vortex of perplexities and cares!"

The door opened; and the Countess of Lascelles made her appearance. The first glance which Adolphus threw upon her, filled him with hopefulness: for though she was still very pale, and looked as if she had passed an utterly sleepless night,—yet her features had lost that rigidity which expressed so stern a resoluteness of purpose: and if there were not actually a conciliatory smile upon her lips, there was at all events a softness of mien that contrasted strikingly with her aspect at their last interview.

"Ethel!" exclaimed the young Earl, hastening towards her, "your look renders me happier than I have been for some time past! I see that you intend to be reasonable: we are to deliberate calmly and in a friendly sense—we are not to meet for altercation as enemies, battling as it were for separate and divided interests—but we are to take counsel together for what may be best suited for us both!"

"Such is the spirit, Adolphus, in which I meet you this morning," answered Ethel: and she did now really smile sweetly though faintly: it was with a melancholy sweetness—and at the same time she proffered him her hand.

"Dearest Ethel, I love you still!" he exclaimed, seizing that hand and conveying it to his lips. "Forgive me if last night I uttered things which were harsh—if I spoke of our love as something which had gone by, never to be recalled!"

"And I also, Adolphus," responded the Countess, suffering him to retain her hand without the slightest effort to withdraw it,—"I also must crave your forgiveness for the apparent implacability with which I urged a point that my better reason subsequently showed to be impossible of realization. There have been faults on both sides: let us cast a veil over them!"

Nothing could exceed the joy with which Adolphus listened to these words. He all of a sudden felt himself to be completely safe: his triumph was ensured with far less trouble than he had anticipated. In the enthusiasm of his feelings,—which the reader must not however mistake for a reviving love towards Ethel,—he snatched her in his arms and strained her to his breast. For a few moments she thus abandoned herself to him; and though she received the kisses which he imprinted upon her cheeks, she gave them not back again with her own lips.

"Now, dearest Ethel," said Adolphus, as she gently disengaged herself from his arms, "let us sit down and converse quietly and amicably—lovingly too——for may I not flatter myself that you have been reflecting upon the proposal I made to you last night?"

"Yes," she responded: and she sate down by his side. "Again must I assure you, my dear Adolphus," she continued—and this was the first time that she had used that caressing term of endearment for some weeks past,—"again must I assure you that when last night I rejected your proposals with so much emphatic sternness, I was not the mistress of myself. The intelligence of that frightful exposure had smitten me so cruel a blow—had come upon me with such suddenness——"

"Speak no more of it, dear Ethel!" interrupted the young Earl: "have we not agreed to throw a veil over the past—to forgive each other—to be lovers again——Aye, and did I not suggest," added Adolphus softly, "that we might be husband and wife if you chose?"

"I have made up my mind," answered Ethel, "to consent to anything that you think fit—on one condition."

"Name, name it!" exclaimed Adolphus hastily: for he was suddenly smitten with the apprehension that it would be something that he might not be able to grant and re-open the arena for discussion and altercation.

"It is a very simple thing, my Adolphus," responded the Countess, with increasing softness of tone and winning tenderness of look: "it is merely that you will bear me hence—this very day—at once!—hence, from a place which has so many horrible and saddening associations! — hence from the great metropolis where dwell all those whom I may never look in the face again!"

"Is that all?" cried the young Earl, infinitely relieved. "Why, dearest Ethel, it is the very thing which I myself should have proposed: for I am sick of scenes whereunto are attached such sad and awful memories!"

"Then it shall be as I say, dear Adolphus," murmured the Countess, again voluntarily abandoning to him her hand: "and I thank you—Oh! I thank you for this ready acquiescence with my request. But when shall we depart?"

"This very day—as you have said," replied

Adolphus. "Whither would you choose to go? To Bloomfield?—or on the Continent?"

The Countess appeared to reflect for a few moments; and then she said, "Let it be to Bloomfield. Delightful is the scenery in that district: the mansion itself is secluded—there are beautiful walks through avenues and lanes embowered with verdure at this season of the year—the air is fresh and revivifying—and we may there hope to regain a healthier tone for our mind and spirits."

"In all this I agree with you, Ethel," responded the young Earl. "We will depart to-day——or," he added, as a sudden thought struck him, "to-morrow at all events."

"And why not to-day?" inquired Ethel hastily.

"Because it is possible," responded Adolphus, "that my presence may be required at the Coroner's inquest upon the murderer and suicide Makepeace. But I will repair at once and ascertain. Meanwhile you can be making all your preparations for departure."

They then issued from the library,—the Countess repairing to her own chamber, and Adolphus proceeding to the station-house to learn such particulars as he needed relative to the inquest. He was informed that from a communication just received from the Coroner, his presence would not be required; the confession of the deceased fully cleared up the mystery of the murder, apart from all other evidence; and in respect to the deed of self-destruction, there was little to be said on the subject—for all was clear and apparent. Adolphus accordingly returned to the mansion; and at two o'clock in the afternoon he took his departure thence, in company with Ethel.

The Bloomfield estate, which had long been in the Lascelles family, was about thirty miles from London; and, as Ethel had already briefly described, it was composed of some of the most beautiful scenery to be found in the county where it was situated. Adolphus had brought with him only one valet—Ethel only one maid: for there were sufficient domestics for all purposes invariably kept at Bloomfield. The arrival of the young Earl and of the widowed Countess—who was of course believed to be his mother-in-law—was heralded by a messenger sent off on horseback an hour before they started from the metropolis; and notwithstanding the notice was so short, everything was ready for their suitable reception. The same messenger communicated to the household at Bloomfield the intelligence of Makepeace's detection and suicide; and he whispered likewise the exposure which had been made of the amour of Adolphus and Ethel. The servants who listened to these tidings, were naturally stricken with astonishment: but it was not their interest to exhibit any other feeling than one of welcome to their master and the Countess, when they alighted from the carriage which drew up in front of that beautiful country-seat.

During the journey from London Ethel had not spoken one word relative to marriage: she had given Adolphus to understand that she would submit to his will in all things,—with the exception however that she craved some little respite ere she again abandoned herself to him as his mistress. She represented that her husband had only died so recently and had perished so horribly—that so many frightful things had occurred—that her feelings had been so harrowed—that her health had suffered so greatly—and that she stood so much in need of repose and rest,—that she felt convinced he would exact from her nothing more than the demeanour of friendship for the present. He, on his side, was only too glad to conciliate her in any way, and to allow her to follow her own inclinations, not to yield an assent: he nevertheless feigned to grant it with reluctance, and to be impatient for the time when all the guilty past should be resuscitated so far as their illicit amour was concerned.

They arrived at Bloomfield, and took possession of the separate suite of chambers prepared for them: but they had their meals together—they passed the day together in-doors, or in rambling through the grounds;—and thus a week went by. During this interval they received a letter from Isabella, whom the intelligence had in the meantime reached that the guilt of Makepeace was discovered and that the wretched man had himself committed suicide. Miss Vincent wrote the fullest details in respect to all that had occurred to herself,—thus accounting for her sudden disappearance from the Gardiners' farm. She did not omit to mention that she had accidentally encountered Christian Ashton at Verner House—nor how he had delivered her from prisonage in the secret chamber. She intimated that it was her purpose to accept the kind invitation of Sir Edgar Beverley and Miss Hall to remain at Verner House until their marriage, which was shortly to take place;—and the whole tenour of her letter was kind and affectionate—for she felt that in some strange and unaccountable way she had done her aunt Ethel and her cousin Adolphus an immense injustice by believing that the crime of the old Earl's murder rested between them. As for Adolphus and Ethel themselves, they had too much to think of on their own account to pay any particular attention to the fact of Isabella having fallen in with Christian: and brief was the comment which Adolphus made upon the subject.

"Now that we have agreed," he said, "to bid defiance to the world and set its opinion at naught—and now too, dearest Ethel, that you are improving in health and spirits, and the time must be near at hand when you will throw yourself into my arms again,—it were all the better that Isabella should find a home elsewhere. Let her marry young Ashton: we will make them a handsome allowance; and at the same time that we thus rid ourselves of Isabella, we shall be performing all our duty towards her."

Ethel assented; and the subject at once dropped.

After breakfast one morning—when Adolphus and the Countess had been about a week at Bloomfield—she said to the young Earl, with smiling countenance and caressing look, "You are indeed most kind to devote so much of your time to me——I may say *all* your time!"

"You see, Ethel," he answered, "that I study my best to ensure your happiness. But when will you be altogether mine again?"—for he was anxious to rivet as soon as possible the bonds which held them together; though at the same time careful to avoid the appearance of tyrannizing over her actions or in any way forcing her inclinations.

"Soon, dearest Adolphus," she responded, inclining her head upon his shoulder: "soon!—for you are becoming dear to me again——yes, very dear!"

"Is it indeed so, Ethel?" he exclaimed, with a gush of feeling that might very well have been taken for the real joy of love itself—whereas it was only the satisfaction of hope at the idea that she would soon be so completely his slave again as to be beyond the reach of any latent inclination that might still exist to proclaim the whole truth to the world according to her proposition a week back at the mansion in the suburbs of London.

"Yes—dearest Adolphus," she responded, still suffering her head to recline upon his shoulder, "I love you——and, when you will," she murmuringly added, "I will be your's again——your's wholly!"

Adolphus encircled the lady's slender waist with his arm—drew her face towards him—and imprinted kisses upon it. Whether it were indeed the country air, together with the unusual amount of walking exercise which she had lately taken—or through an altered state of the mind—or from all these causes united, we cannot say: but certain it is that her appearance was considerably improved during the week that she had already passed at Bloomfield. Still the traces of recent care were perceptible upon her cheeks: her form too was more slender than it was wont to be in the voluptuous symmetry of its proportions; nevertheless there was still the soft lustre in her large clear blue eyes,—still the pearly whiteness of the teeth shining between the parting roses of the lips—still the bright glory of the rich auburn hair. And as Adolphus thus drew her towards him, he felt something like a feeling of tenderness returning,—until slowly into his mind came back the recollection of the bitterness of all those altercations which had taken place between them; and in the presence of these recollections the softer feelings gradually disappeared, as twilight recedes when the shades of night come on.

But not by his countenance did he exhibit the change that was thus taking place in his mind: there was a smile upon his features, while bitterness was arising in his heart; for, as the reader comprehends, it was his interest, and therefore his purpose, to play a deep game—to assume everything that was conciliatory—to simulate affection—and to veil every thought that might shock or give offence. And Ethel herself had now one arm thrown over his shoulder; and as he was seated, and she was standing by him, or rather half-reclining in his arms, she looked down into his countenance. There was a smile upon *her* features likewise; her eyes appeared fraught with a reviving tenderness; and Adolphus said within himself, "Yes—truly she loves me well again!"

"We will go forth to walk," said the Countess: "the weather is beautiful—the air is delicious—and there is that wild part of the estate, you know, my dear Adolphus, which we have not yet visited since we were down here, but which is so picturesque."

"You mean the Maiden's Bridge?" said the young Earl.

"Yes," exclaimed Ethel: and instantaneously disengaging herself from his arms, she hurried towards the door,—adding, "I will put on my bonnet and scarf in a moment, and be with you."

In a few minutes they were walking forth together,—the young widow leaning upon the arm of the young nobleman. There was a heightened colour upon her cheeks—a deeper roseate tinge than for some time past had displayed itself there; and her eyes too appeared to shine with a happier lustre.

The weather was indeed beautiful—the sunbeams irradiated the entire landscape—but there was a breeze which prevented their extreme sultriness from being felt. The way of the ramblers led first through the spacious park—then across the fields, in the direction of a wooded dell in the distance.

"Is there not some strange legend attached to the spot which we are about to visit?" inquired the Countess, as she walked by the side of Adolphus, leaning on his arm.

"To be sure!" he exclaimed: "did you never hear it? It is that legend which gives its name to the bridge."

"No—I never heard it," responded the Countess; and suddenly stooping down, she plucked a wild-flower which grew by the side of the pathway. "What is that legend?" she inquired, tearing to pieces the floweret she had just culled.

There was something slightly wayward or peculiar in her manner, as it struck Adolphus for a moment: but attributing it to the return of a certain buoyancy of spirits with the change of scene and the fresh air of Bloomfield, he ceased to think of it.

"And so you never heard the legend of the Maiden's Bridge?" he said. "And yet methinks this is not your first visit to Bloomfield?"

"No," she responded; "I was here once before. It was with the late Earl," she added softly; "and then for so short a time that though I paid a hurried visit to all these scenes of interest, yet I had not leisure to inquire particularly about them. Besides," she exclaimed, in a gayer tone, "to listen to legends of this sort, one must have a companion who can tell them pleasantly or pathetically, as the case may be."

Adolphus was charmed at this rapidly altering manner of the Countess: for never since her husband's death had she seemed so gay as on the present occasion; and he therefore felt convinced that within a very brief space of time she would abandon herself completely to him again. Besides, with this return of good spirits, there was all the less chance that she would relapse into the dark sombre mood that would prompt her to demand the sacrifice of himself.

"After so pretty a compliment to my powers as a legend-teller," he said, smiling,—"a compliment which, though implied rather than pointedly uttered, I am vain enough to take unto myself,—I cannot delay the tale you are so anxious to hear. You have visited the dell before? If it were in Scotland, or in any wilder district than this, it would be called a ravine. Deep and rapid is the stream that runs at the bottom; and for several feet upward above the turbid bosom of the water, the sides are perfectly escarped. Do you remember all this, Ethel?"

"Yes—I think so," she answered: "but my recollection of the place is by no means strong, though it is barely eighteen months since I visited it."

"You will presently find my description accurate," continued Adolphus. "But is it not singular that over the most dangerous of places there should be the most dangerous of bridges?"

"The bridge is so little used, doubtless," suggested Ethel, "that it has not been thought worth while to form a larger and a safer one."

"And yet with all the improvements," said Adolphus, "that have been made upon the estate by the late Earl and his father before him, is it not astonishing that they should have left that vile old crazy wooden bridge? I vow, Ethel, that to-morrow I will give orders for a new one."

"And perhaps spoil the wild picturesque beauty of the scene," added the Countess; "or at all events destroy the interest of the Maiden's Legend."

"But conceive, Ethel, a bridge not more than a yard wide, and with only a rail on one side!—so that if some unfortunate creature in a tipsy state, or suddenly seized with giddiness, should be passing over, down he must go, full fifty feet, into the stream beneath—and nothing could save him! For, as I have told you, the sides are all escarped——"

"It is indeed dangerous," observed Ethel; "and perhaps you would do well——But, come! it will be time enough to think of a new bridge to-morrow. For the present let me have the legend."

"A legend, by rights," resumed Adolphus, again smiling, "ought to go back for at least two or three hundred years—whereas this belongs to a period of no more ancient date than about the close of the last century. Indeed, the very cottages that are associated with the tale—for it is a perfectly true one—may be seen in the valley on the other side of the hill bordering the ravine. Those two cottages were inhabited by peasant families—as I suppose they are now. An elderly couple lived in one—and an elderly couple in the other. To one couple belonged a son, who of course was exceedingly handsome—or else he would not be fitted for the hero of a romance, much less for a gay deceiver, as he was: while the other couple possessed a daughter, who was as lovely as every heroine ought to be. And it followed—likewise as a natural occurrence in a tale——"

"But you tell me," said Ethel, laughing, "that it is a true one—and yet you are treating it as a romance?"

"It is indeed all true, though I may seem to treat it with a certain gaiety, which is rather derived from the infection of your buoyant spirits, my sweet Ethel, than from the nature of the legend itself, which has a termination anything but comic. However, as I was about to observe, the handsome young peasant and the beautiful young damsel fell in love with each other. They were wont to ramble forth on a summer evening; and I know not why, but certain it is that they used to take their station upon the bridge, where they mingled their sweet voices while the stream was gurgling beneath. Matters went on for some months, until at last the young peasant swain,—who must have been sadly fickle,—was smitten with the beauty of a damsel in the village yonder—the daughter of a small tradesman who had just taken a shop there. He gradually neglected his first love, and devoted his attentions to his new one. Perhaps he thought it perferable to espouse a tradesman's daughter than a girl in his own sphere; or perhaps he was really more enamoured of his new love than of his old. The neglected fair one reproached him not: but she pined and faded visibly. She avoided him: for her pride would not suffer her to throw herself in the way of one who no longer loved her. At length, in the course of a few months, everything was settled for the bridal of the peasant and the tradesman's daughter: the village was all excitement and curiosity—for these rural weddings are a source of general glee in the little communities where they take place. And now, Ethel, you must suppose that the eve before the bridal morn had arrived; and the happy swain was returning at an earlier hour than usual from a visit to his intended, so that he might have leisure to complete his preparations for the morrow. It was about nine o'clock on a charming moonlit evening that he was thus passing through the valley on his way back to the cottage where he dwelt with his parents,—when a female figure came gliding towards him. It was the deceived and betrayed girl. She at once assured the young man that she came not to reproach him, but to crave a last boon. He was remorse-stricken and afflicted; and he swore to grant it. She said that as their vows had been pledged in the sight of heaven, and as they had never released each other from those vows, it was only meet and proper that they should do so now, as solemnly as they had plighted them. The poor girl added that the phantasy had seized upon her for this ceremony to take place in its mournfulness, where their troth had been pledged in its happiness; and the swain, believing that her intellect was affected, and full of remorseful compassion, assented to whatever she might propose. They proceeded together towards the bridge,—walking in silence side by side, and without touching each other's hands. A young shepherd of their acquaintance, who was close by at the time—though he himself was unseen, being concealed behind a clump of trees—heard and beheld all that passed. Inspired by curiosity, he followed them, still unperceived,—which could scarcely have been a difficult task, for they were doubtless absorbed entirely in their own thoughts. They reached the bridge—they entered upon it—and the shepherd posted himself behind a tree, where, in the clear moonlight, he purposed to watch all that took place. They reached the middle of the bridge. At that moment a cloud obscured the moon: the shepherd heard the young maiden's voice saying plaintively, '*Forgive me, my well beloved!*'—then there was an awful cry, quickly followed by a loud splash in the waters beneath—and all was over! The two bodies were found on the following day about three miles distant,—the arms of the girl still tightly clasped around the neck of her faithless but adored swain—yes, as tightly clasped as they must have been when she threw herself with him from the bridge!"

"And that is the Maid's Legend?" said Ethel. "It is truly an affecting tale—but romantic enough to be improbable."

"Think you, then," inquired Adolphus, "that whatsoever is wildly romantic must be mistrusted?"

"It is of course to be received with more caution," responded the Countess, "than that which is natural and of every-day occurrence."

"Were it an every-day occurrence," answered the young Earl, smiling, "there would be no interest in the tale. But here is the bridge!"

For the last few minutes they had been threading their way along a path which ran through a grove; and a slight winding in that path suddenly brought them within sight of the bridge, which was about a dozen yards distant. The gurgling waters in the depth of the ravine now plainly met their ears; and Adolphus said, "The spot is wildly picturesque: I do not know, after all, but that it were a sin to build a new bridge here."

"Oh, I am sure," exclaimed Ethel, "you, my dear Adolphus, will never do it!"—and thus speaking, she stopped short at the commencement of the bridge, from which point the eye could sweep along the depth of the dell.

"At all events," said the young Earl, "I will order another hand-rail to be laid across—for this is positively dangerous."

"Dangerous—no!" ejaculated the Countess, with a laugh. "But these cottages of which you were speaking, and where the two families dwelt——"

"They are in the valley behind the eminence on the opposite side of the ravine. That is the tree which, as the legend tells, concealed the shepherd who was a witness of the catastrophe."

"I should like to see the cottages," observed Ethel,—"the clump of trees likewise, behind which the shepherd was hidden—and the spot where the young maiden met her faithless lover on the memorable night which marked their doom."

"Have you really the courage, Ethel," inquired Adolphus, "to cross the bridge?"

"Oh, the courage!" she ejaculated, laughing gaily. "Is it so grand an achievement, after all? Look! you shall see:"—and she tripped upon the bridge.

The young Earl at once followed her. It was with a light step, and her hand scarcely touching the rail, that she thus advanced till she gained the middle of the bridge. There she stopped short; and looking over the rail, contemplated the foaming water which was flashing brightly in the sunbeams.

"Perhaps it was here, Adolphus," she at length said, turning towards her companion,—"here, upon this very spot, that the catastrophe took place?"

"Yes—the legend says," he answered, "that it was in the middle of the bridge, according to the tale which the shepherd subsequently told."

"And here, then, they fell over," said Ethel, "the girl's arms tightly clasped around the neck of him who was the ruin of her happiness?"

"Yes—here," rejoined the young Earl, turning round at the same time, as the Countess had done, to contemplate the water from the side which was unprotected by the handrail.

"Forgive me, Adolphus!" suddenly exclaimed Ethel.

At the same instant her arms were thrown about his neck: tightly were they clasped—a wild and fearful cry thrilled forth from his lips—one desperate struggle to disengage himself—but all in vain!—over they fell—down, down they went! The entire ravine, the grove, and all the adjacent district echoed with the terrific cries of the young lord: but not another sound than the words "*Forgive me, Adolphus!*" which she had uttered, came from the lips of Ethel. There was a terrific splash; and away their bodies were borne, the arms of the Countess still tight around his neck—her hands clasped—as if those arms and hands of her's constituted an iron vice!

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

THE GRAVE-STONE.

The reader will not have forgotten that beautiful little village in Westmoreland where Barney the Burker obtained the situation of assistant grave-digger to old Jonathan Carnabie. To this village we must now return.

It was an early hour in the morning; and a female, clad in gipsy-like apparel, stood in the middle of the churchyard, contemplating that grave-stone which bore the simple inscription of "*October*, 1830." There was nothing wild in her look now—nothing wandering nor restless: it was fixed and replete with sadness. For several minutes did she thus stand gazing upon that head-stone, as if the singular conciseness of the inscription thus rivetted her attention—or else as if there were something in the date which more or less associated itself with certain memories floating in her brain.

The reader of course recognises Crazy Jane; and it is therefore useless to observe any mystery upon the point. The woman had intervals which, if not positively lucid, were at all events characterised by a certain clearness of perception in comparison with other periods; as, for instance, when she gave the information which led to so startling a turn in the trial of Lettice Rodney. The present occasion was one of the happier moods of her intellect, as she stood gazing upon the tombstone; and if an observer had been nigh, he might probably have perceived that beneath that fixity of look and mournful calmness of countenance, there was a certain inward agitation or excitement, arising from the powerful efforts and the straining attempts which the poor woman was making to disentangle her thoughts completely and marshal all her mental associations for the purpose of clear and intelligible review.

"He spoke of a poor mad lady," she presently said in a murmuring tone to herself; "and *who* was likely to have been driven mad if not my poor dear mistress? That date——but, Ah! my ideas grow confused again——No, no! I cannot rightly understand that which it appears as if I seek and want to comprehend!"

She turned away slowly and mournfully; and just at that instant old Jonathan Carnabie and his new assistant were advancing towards the gate of the churchyard.

"Ah!" she ejaculated, "there are the men whom I seek!——they were together the other night when they said something which struck me so strangely!"

"Here is this poor crazy creature again," said old Jonathan. "I wonder why she is hanging about the village? We must find out where she belongs, and have her passed to her parish: it will never do for her to become chargeable to our local rates."

"You are the man, Mr. Carnabie," said the Burker, "to get rid of her. Go and try your eloquence. There! blow me if I haven't forgot the mattock—and I'll just run and fetch it."

"Do," responded the old sexton: and he advanced towards Crazy Jane, who, being at a distance of about fifty yards, had not overheard a single syllable that passed between the sexton and his assistant.

Meanwhile the Burker, turning rapidly away, had sped back to the cottage.

"My poor woman," said Jonathan, accosting Crazy Jane, "you seem to be a houseless wanderer——"

"A wanderer?—yes!" she ejaculated: "because it is my destiny! My mind will not let me rest. Houseless did you say? No—not when I choose to ask for an asylum: for who would refuse it to a poor creature such as I am? Besides," she added, after a pause, "I can pay for what I have when payment is required."

Thus speaking, she dived her lank hand down into a pocket, and drew forth a quantity of coin. Silver and halfpence were all jumbled together; and it struck the old sexton that he caught the glitter of two or three pieces of a still more precious metal. But the next instant Crazy Jane had transferred the money back to her pocket,—exclaiming with a sort of triumph, "So you see that I am not altogether a mendicant, though you perhaps took me for one?"

"I am well pleased, my poor woman," answered Jonathan, "to find that you are thus independent of casual charity. But why are you not with your friends?—for to possess money argues to a certain extent the possession of friends——"

"Yes,—yes—I have friends," ejaculated Crazy Jane,—"friends who sought to do everything for me: but no!—my wandering spirit would not suffer me to stay where they placed me. Do you know, old man," she added, advancing close up to him, and speaking in a low voice, as well as with a certain mysterious significancy of look,—"do you know that if ever I remain long in one place, something whispers in my ear that I must go forth on my travels again—for that there is something which I seek—and that something I must find!"

"And what is this something which you seek?" asked the old sexton in a gentle voice; for he pitied the poor woman.

She had fallen into a deep reverie: she did not hear the question—or if she did, she chose not to answer it; and for upwards of a minute did silence thus prevail. At length suddenly raising her eyes, she fixed her looks upon the gravestone with the strangely brief inscription—and abruptly asked, "Who lies there?"

"A poor lady," responded old Carnabie, "who died in this village under very distressing circumstances."

"Yes, yes—I remember! you said so the other night!" ejaculated Crazy Jane. "I heard you telling that man who was with you——But, oh! my memory is so bad!" and then she pressed her hand, as if with a sensation of pain, against her forehead.

"You told me on that night," continued Jonathan Carnabie, "that you wanted to ask me some questions. If you like to put them now, I will give you any information that lies in my power."

"That lady," said Crazy Jane, keeping her eyes still riveted upon the gravestone,—"was she not mad? did I not hear you say that it was a deep, silent, brooding madness? Yes, yes! those were the words!" cried the poor creature, with a sudden exultation at having recollected them.

"And what I said was the truth," answered Jonathan Carnabie. "It was a sad tale—and if I thought you could understand it, or follow my words while I tell it——"

"I shall understand it," interrupted Jane. "Yes—my mind is clearer now—my ideas are collected—I shall be able to listen to you. Proceed, before the cloud again comes over me."

"You see that stone bears the date of October, 1830," began the sexton: "but it was in the beginning of the same year—therefore a matter of eight months before that date—that as I was coming early one morning to open the church to ring the bells for a marriage which was to take place, I saw a female lying across one of the graves with her face downwards. I hastened towards her, and lifted her up. I thought she was dead—she was as pale as a corpse, and as cold as one too. But how beautiful!"

"Ah, beautiful indeed!" murmured Crazy Jane. "But go on—go on. Had she dark hair—long flowing dark hair?"

"In truth she had not at *that* time," replied the old sexton: "for her head had been closely shaved——"

"Oh, to cut off that beautiful, beautiful hair?" exclaimed the mad woman, clasping her hands and shaking herself as if in rage from head to foot.

"Did you know her, then?" asked old Jonathan eagerly: "is it possible that you knew her? or do you only suspect who she was?"

"No matter!" interrupted Crazy Jane impatiently. "Proceed, I tell you."

"Well," continued the sexton, glancing at his singular companion's countenance in order to assure himself, so far as he could judge, that she was in a suitable frame of mind to hear what he had to say, and therefore to render it worth while for him to proceed,—"I went and picked up the lady, as I have just told you—for a lady she was by every appearance, though her dress was much travel-soiled;—and I found that she was in a deep swoon. I bore her off to the parsonage, which you see close by. The rector and his family were all absent at the time, on a visit to some friends in Lancashire: there was no one but a female-servant in the house—but she did her best to recover the poor lady from her insensibility. When she opened her eyes——"

"And those eyes," ejaculated Crazy Jane eagerly, "were large and dark—bright, but sweetly expressive? Oh, methinks I see them now!"—and the poor creature suddenly burst forth into an agony of convulsive sobs.

"Truly this woman must have known that lady well," thought Jonathan Carnabie to himself: and suffering a minute or two to elapse until Crazy Jane's paroxysm of grief was moderated, he said slowly and quietly, "Yes, to the best of my recollection the lady *had* large dark eyes: but as for their lustre, it was gone—and as for their sweetness of expression, it was lost in the dull vacancy of her gaze."

"Poor dear lady!" murmured Crazy Jane. "Oh, what must she have suffered! what must she have suffered! And *my* sufferings—they have been as nothing in comparison! Do you mean, old man—do you mean that she was mad?"

"I do," answered Jonathan: then after a pause, he went on to say, "I was telling you that I conveyed her into the parsonage, where the servant-girl attended upon her; and though she came back to life, it could scarcely be called to consciousness—for the poor creature's mind seemed totally gone. She took no more notice of anything than a child of six months old. Stop!—I forgot! Yes, when the maid undressed her, there was a small velvet bag, sewn all round—a little bag not near so large as the palm of your hand—and it was fastened to a black ribbon round her neck. This, as the maid told me—for of course I was not present when the lady was undressed—she clutched with a sudden vehemence, crying out, 'No, no! you shall not take it from me!'—The girl never meant to take the bag away; and therefore she at once told the poor lady not to be frightened on that score. This was the only thing she seemed to take any notice of; and when she found that the bag was safe, she relapsed into her dull dead apathetic condition, having no further regard for anything. A surgeon was sent for; and he said that the poor lady was utterly bereft of her senses—that her mind was a perfect void—that her reason was totally gone. Of course we all thought that as her head was shaved, she had escaped from some lunatic asylum, and that it would not therefore be very difficult to find out where she had come from. Nevertheless, she had evidently been walking far; for her shoes were worn right through—her stockings also—and the soles of her feet were cut and bleeding."

Here Crazy Jane gave a deep convulsive moan; and staggering against the grave-stone, with the concise inscription, she leant over it weeping bitterly. Several minutes thus elapsed, until she suddenly raised her countenance again; and then it wore a look so altered—so wild—that the old sexton felt convinced the poor creature was now no longer in a frame of mind to listen to his story. And she herself speedily made him aware that he was perfectly right.

"No more now!" she ejaculated: "not another word for the present! What you have said is impressed *here!*"—and she pointed vehemently three or four times to her forehead: "but my brain could bear no more!"—and there was a maniac wildness in her eyes. "Oh, I have already heard too much—too much! Another time, old man, I will come back and hear what more you have to say. Ah! you took me for a beggar and a mendicant," she ejaculated, suddenly stopping short as she was just on the very point of coming away: then, diving her hand down into her pocket, she brought forth three or four shillings; and flinging them towards him, cried, "Go drink to the health of Crazy Jane!"

With these words she hurried away; and turning the angle of the church, was lost to the view of the old sexton, who stood gazing after her until she thus disappeared.

"She is a strange creature," he muttered to himself, as he stooped down and picked up the coins: "I hope she will keep her word and come back—for she evidently knows something about the poor lady. Or perhaps after all it may only be a portion of her madness? Yet it would be strange, though, that she should know the colour of her hair and eyes: for now that I bethink me, when the poor lady's hair did grow again, it was black. I wonder whether——But we shall see all in good time, no doubt. Crazy Jane is pretty sure to return. But where is that precious assistant of mine all this while?"

We will explain the real cause of the Burker's somewhat abrupt disappearance and prolonged absence, under the pretext of fetching a mattock from old Carnabie's cottage, though he knew perfectly well that the implement had been left along with others, on the previous evening, inside the church-porch. The fact is, Mr. Barnes did not like the appearance of the mad woman. On the night that she had so suddenly presented herself to him and the sexton, he was smitten with a certain suspicion; and therefore he had taken very good care not to speak a single word, for fear his voice should be recognised. When she had fled so precipitately, he buoyed himself up with the hope that she would not return again into that neighbourhood—but that her steps, as wayward and unsettled as her own brain, would carry her elsewhere. Now therefore that she re-appeared in the same place, he was again seized with alarm; and yielding to that terror, had suddenly absented himself under the pretext which we have described. From the window of old Carnabie's cottage, he watched the woman and the sexton as they stood in discourse together in the churchyard; and as he perceived by her manner and her gesticulations that she was much excited, he feared lest the conversation regarded himself; but when she so precipitately hurried off again, and the sexton stood in a musing manner for a few minutes, the Burker's courage revived.

"If it was me they was talking of," he said to himself, "they would have gone off at once to raise the whole willage and hunt me down like a mad dog."

The Burker thereupon issued forth from the cottage, and hastened to rejoin old Carnabie: but we will interrupt the progress of our narrative for a few moments, to depict the precise nature of the Burker's apprehensions.

He had of course read the newspaper-accounts of Lettice Rodney's trial at Liverpool;—and beyond what we ourselves have recorded on that subject in our narrative, the journals had given several minute particulars in respect to the female who without being brought forward in Court, had nevertheless, through the medium of another species of deposition, given so important a turn to the proceedings. The caterers for the public press had described her as a poor wandering maniac who had for some years been known in the neighbourhood of Liverpool: they had delineated her personal appearance, and had added that she was usually known by the denomination of Crazy Jane. All these particulars had Barney the Burker read at the time, for they were transferred from the provincial to the London papers; and thus when the woman so suddenly appeared before old Carnabie and himself in Woodbridge church-yard, he had been smitten with the apprehension that she was the person whose testimony, presented in writing to the Court, had led to the acquittal of Lettice Rodney, the incarceration of Mrs. Webber, and the subsequent arrest of himself. Still the Burker was not completely sure that this woman who now haunted the neighbourhood of Woodbridge, was in reality Crazy Jane—though he had certainly little doubt on the subject.

He rejoined the old sexton, as we have already said; and a furtive look, hastily flung upon Carnabie's countenance, convinced the miscreant that nothing disagreeable or threatening had transpired in reference to himself.

"Well, where is the mattock?" asked Jonathan, somewhat surlily: "and what made you such a long time in looking for it?"

"It was just because I could not find it that I stayed so long," answered the Burker; "and now I recollect, it's along with t'other things in the porch yonder. But you've had that poor mad creetur' a chattering away with you at a gallows' rate!"

"I can't rightly make her out," responded the sexton: "she is as demented as one can be in some respects—and yet she seems as if she had a sort of lucidity on one subject."

"And what's that?" inquired the Burker, as if with an air of indifference.

"Why, about the poor lady that is buried here," replied Jonathan, pointing to the grave headed by the stone with the concise inscription. "It appears as if she knew that lady; and so I was telling her the sad romantic story—which, by the bye, I promised to narrate to you one of these days——"

"Well, but she bolted away again like mad," interjected the Burker.

"Like mad, as she assuredly is!" rejoined the sexton. "I was only half through the story—she got much excited—said she would come back another day—and hurried off precipitately."

"I thought you meant to persuade her to get out of the parish altogether," observed Barnes, "as you wouldn't have no wagrants and waggabone mendicants here?"

"A vagrant she may be, poor creature!" said Jonathan, in a compassionating tone—"and a vagabond too for that matter; for the terms merely mean a wanderer without a settled home: but a mendicant she is not. She has plenty of money——"

"Plenty of money, eh?" said the Burker. "Where the deuce could she get it from?"

"*That* she did not tell me," answered Jonathan: "but she threw me a—a—sixpence—telling me to drink her health; and so you and I will have a drop of beer presently, when we have finished our morning's work."

"It must have been a sixpence in halfpence though," thought the Burker to himself; "for I saw you stoop several times, old feller, to pick the coins up; and I'll be bound it was a handful of silver—or else how should you know she had plenty of money?"—but Barnes only thus mused inwardly, and did not give audible expression to his thoughts; for he was particularly careful not to excite in any way the suspicions of the sexton.

"Yes," continued Jonathan, perfectly unconscious of what was passing in the mind of his assistant, "she has got a pocket well-filled with coin; and now I bethink me, she said I was to drink the health of Crazy Jane."

"What a rum name to call herself by!" observed Barney: but as he averted his countenance for an instant, its expression was ghastly—for the mention of that name had dissipated whatsoever little doubt there was in his mind, and had confirmed all his worst fears. "And so she's coming back again—is she?" he inquired.

"She says so—and I have no doubt she will," responded the sexton. "She has got something into her head about the poor lady that lies buried there; and I know enough of these crazy people to be aware that when once they *do* get hold of a particular crotchet, they always stick to it. She is as certain to come back as that you and I are here."

"Poor creature?" said the Burker, affecting a tone of sympathy, although at the same instant he resolved upon the destruction of either the sexton or crazy Jane—and perhaps of both.

"Though you are such a strange-looking fellow," said old Carnabie, "you have got a good heart—that is quite clear. One must not always go by the looks."

"I should raything think not!" ejaculated the Burker, as he walked on by the sexton's side.

The two men proceeded to the accomplishment of the work they had in hand: but all the while the Burker was employed in digging a grave for some recently deceased villager, he was deliberating with himself upon the mode of executing the hideous purpose he now entertained. The toil continued till mid-day—at which hour Jonathan returned to his cottage; while the Burker proceeded to the public-house to fetch as much beer as might be purchased with the sixpence which Jonathan gave him, and which he represented as the extent of Crazy Jane's gratuity. After dinner the old sexton had some business to transact in the village; and the Burker's time was now at his own disposal. He repaired to the church-yard, so that in case Jonathan should return earlier than he had intimated, he might at once be found;—and lighting his pipe, he threw himself on the grass in the shade of a high tombstone; for the day was exceedingly sultry, and the sunbeams poured down with all their unclouded torrid strength. Flinging off his hat, the Burker covered his head with an old cotton handkerchief, and thus made himself as comfortable as possible, while enjoying his pipe and giving way to his reflections.

It will be necessary to observe that since the Burker had been in Jonathan Carnabie's service, he had occupied a little outhouse—or we might rather say a shed, attached to the sexton's cottage, and in which a truckle-bedstead had been placed for his accommodation. Mr. Barnes was soon in a condition to judge by Jonathan's habits that he was economical and saving: and he more than suspected that the old man had a little hoard in his cottage. Already had the idea flitted across his brain that if he could acquire a positive certainty on the point, he would help himself to the treasure—for treasure it would prove to him, no matter how small the amount,—and he might then betake himself to another district, or else get out of the country altogether. Now therefore that the Burker's alarm was excited in respect to the appearance of Crazy Jane in the neighbourhood of the village of Woodbridge, he was resolved to achieve that crime of which he had hitherto but vaguely and dimly thought. But if he could also possess himself of Crazy Jane's money, it would be an addition to the store he anticipated to derive from the other quarter; and the Burker was not a man to stick at a couple of crimes—no, nor a dozen either—if he could only thereby improve his present depressed condition.

While thus reflecting, and utterly unsuspicious of the possibility of being overheard, Barney began to give audible expression to his thoughts.

"Yes," he said, while leisurely smoking his pipe, "Woodbridge is getting a precious sight too hot to hold such a popular gen'leman as myself; and I must take my precious carcase off to another part of the world. That old scoundrel Carnabie is warm—I know he is; and I'll ferret out his hoard before I am a night older. If so be he wakes up—well then, there's the mattock, or the spade, or the crow-bar as will deuced soon cook his goose for him. And then that accursed she-devil Crazy Jane, which sp'iled all the hash at Liverpool—I shall like to give her a topper on the head—and by jingo, I'll do it too!"

Having come to this most comforting conclusion, the Burker re-filled his pipe; and a person who had been standing behind a tombstone, glided noiselessly away over the long grass. That person was Crazy Jane. After a few hours' interval since her discourse with Carnabie, she had returned to the churchyard in a lucid state of mind again, and in the hope of finding him that he might finish his narrative relative to the unknown lady who slept beneath the turf for which he had evinced so much care, unrecompensed and unrewarded, throughout so many years. But while wandering amidst the tombstones in the hope of finding Carnabie, Crazy Jane had caught a glimpse of the Burker's form; and at once recognising him as the man whom she had seen with Jonathan, she thought of inquiring where the sexton himself was? She had approached noiselessly and unperceived, though she had not at first studied this degree of caution: just as she was about to address him, he began to speak; and his voice struck her with an effect as if a heavy blow had been dealt her. She knew it at once: it was that of the man whom she had heard conversing with Mrs. Webber at the back gate of Pollard's house at Liverpool, on the night when the murder of that unfortunate gentleman was accomplished. Crazy Jane glided behind the tombstone, and listened in dumb horror to the words of unmistakeable menace that issued from the villain's lips. When he had ceased speaking, she glided away, as already stated; and this time she *did* study to pursue her path as noiselessly as possible.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

WOODBRIDGE.

It was eight o'clock in the evening, when a post-chaise drove into the little village of Woodbridge, and stopped at the inn. A single traveller alighted—and this was Mr. Redcliffe.

In answer to the inquiries of the landlord, he stated that he might remain a day or two in that place; and he nodded an assent to the proposal that refreshments should be at once served up. These however he scarcely touched, and presently strolled forth to woo the gentle breeze of the evening, and perhaps to seek some solitude where for a while he might be alone with his own thoughts. He had certain inquiries to make in this neighbourhood; but he postponed them until the morrow—for his reflections during the day's travelling had, as was indeed often the case with the unhappy gentleman, excited his feelings to the extremest degree of tension.

His steps took him towards the churchyard: it was now a little past nine o'clock—the evening was beautifully clear—and slowly did Mr. Redcliffe pursue his way through the cemetery, contemplating the grave-stones. Presently his eyes settled upon that particular one which has been so often mentioned, and which bore the inscription of *October*, 1830. Jonathan Carnabie's care had recently blackened the indented letters forming this inscription; so that it was plainly visible on the gleaming white surface of the stone. Mr. Redcliffe was naturally struck by the singular brevity of this graven memorial of the buried dead; and the date too appeared to give a thrilling keenness to the memories that were floating in his mind.

"Singular epitaph!" he said in an audible tone: "wherefore the absence of any name to indicate to the passer-by who reposes beneath? Was it that the dead who lies here, was, when living, so stained with crime that surviving relatives, though bestowing the right of solemn obsequies, yet dared not perpetuate a name that guilt had rendered infamous? And yet it can scarcely be so: for if it were, the remains of this unnamed one would scarcely have found sepulture in consecrated ground!"

At that instant Mr. Redcliffe became aware of a human form approaching along the walk intersecting the churchyard: he saw that it was the form of a woman—and a second glance made him start and ejaculate, "Ah! *one* of the objects of my search!"

"Mr. Redcliffe," said Crazy Jane—for she indeed it was—and she presented herself with no greeting of courtesy, nor with any apology for her abrupt and secret withdrawal from the asylum which he had provided for her after the trial of Lettice Rodney,—"Mr. Redcliffe, there lies the one concerning whom you have twice or thrice spoken to me!"

Crazy Jane pointed with her lank arm to the grave; and Redcliffe, hastily turning aside, concealed from the woman's view the unutterable emotions which had suddenly found silent but eloquent expression in his countenance.

"Then she is dead!" he at length lowly murmured to himself: but the woman heard not what he said. "How know you," he inquired, after another pause of nearly a minute,—"how know you that she lies here?"

"You yourself shall know it from the same source whence I learnt it," answered Jane. "O Mr. Redcliffe! I am not mad at this moment. No, no!—never, never for long years have I understood myself so well as at this instant!—no, not even when telling all I knew to the magistrates and yourself in respect to the horrible murder at Liverpool! I heard things this morning," she continued, slowly and gravely, and in a perfectly collected manner, "which have made me reflect in a way that I have not reflected before for a long, long time. A change has taken place within me. I feel it *here*," she said, placing her hand upon her brow; "and I feel it *here*, too," she added, placing her hand upon her heart.

"I am rejoiced to hear you thus speak, Jane!" replied Redcliffe: but though he spoke of joy, there was nevertheless a deep sadness in his tone,—a sadness infused from the fountains of his heart.

"Yes, sir," proceeded the woman, "I felt that I had a mission to accomplish, crazed though I were—a mission to discover the fate of my beloved mistress; and at the very time when methought my footsteps were most wayward, heaven itself was guiding them towards the spot where the mystery was to be solved!"

"But, Oh! how is this mystery solved?" asked Redcliffe, in a voice where pathos, and anguish, and suspense were so commingled that they seemed to give to his accents a new tone, and at the same time the mournful workings of his countenance expressed such kindred feelings that they appeared to give it a new aspect.

Jane started as if something had suddenly galvanized her—as if some long-slumbering memory of the past was now all in an instant awakened; and with a species of dismayed suspense, strangely blended with a wondering joy that dared not have faith in the source of its own existence, her eyes were fixed keenly and searchingly upon him.

"Good heavens!" she ejaculated, "is it possible? Oh! what wild ideas are these?—ideas of the long lost—yes, even of the dead——"

"Hush, Jane — hush!" said Mr. Redcliffe: "for heaven's sake hush! I see that you know me!"

"Yes—as if by an inspiration!" exclaimed the woman, her eyes brightening vividly with the very feeling which she had just expressed. "But tell me—Oh! tell me," she instantaneously ejaculated, as another reminiscence flashed forcibly to her mind,—"you did not—no, you did not——"

"Hush, Jane! I know what you mean," interrupted Redcliffe. "No!—that heaven above which smiles upon us in its star-lit beauty, can attest——"

"Enough, enough!" murmured Jane: "I believe you—Oh, I believe you!"—and sinking down at his feet, she embraced his knees, sobbing with a variety of conflicting feelings, but amidst which a still wondering joy was the principal.

"Rise, my poor woman," said Mr. Redcliffe, so profoundly affected that the tears were streaming down his cheeks: "rise, I say, faithful—Oh, too faithful Jane!—so faithful to the memory of your beloved mistress that your reason has reeled and tottered, and been well-nigh wrecked utterly! Rise: it is not to me that you must kneel——But we should both kneel—and here too!" he added, pointing towards the nameless grave.

"I have been kneeling there this evening," answered Jane: "I have watered that turf with my tears, for I know whose remains lie beneath! And I invoked the sainted spirit of my beloved mistress——for a saint in heaven I know she must be!—I invoked her sainted spirit, I say, to intercede at the throne of Eternal Grace that my reason might be given back to me—and a soft voice seemed to whisper in my ear that the prayer was heard and that the boon I craved was granted! Then I arose from over the turf of that grave; and I was departing, when I beheld the form of some one stop here to contemplate the stone. I beheld you stand awhile on this spot—I marvelled who he could be that thus shared with me the deep, deep interest I feel in this grave: I approached—I recognised you."

"And now will you tell me, Jane," asked Mr. Redcliffe, who had listened with profoundest emotions to her statement—"will you tell me whence you learnt sufficient to convince you——"

"Mr. Redcliffe—for by that name will I still call you," interrupted Jane, a sudden reminiscence striking her—"there is this night a human life to be saved—and he who shall be thus saved, will tell you all! My knowledge of everything is but yet partial: the tale to which I listened remains unfinished——"

"And this life that is to be saved?" said Mr. Redcliffe, apprehending for a moment that the poor creature's intellect was wandering again: and he gazed upon her anxiously to see if his alarming surmise was well founded.

"No, no!" she exclaimed, penetrating what was passing in his mind; "my reason errs not again! It is as I assure you. In that cottage dwells the sexton, who can tell you the tale of this perished one's hapless fate; and his life is in danger—for the miscreant who did the deed at Liverpool, is in the neighbourhood——he is there!"

"What!" ejaculated Redcliffe: "Barnes—the murderer of Pollard—the man who escaped from gaol——"

"He is there!" responded Jane, pointing towards the cottage; "and he contemplates another crime. I was determined to frustrate it:—that very instant when I encountered you, was I about to repair to the village and invoke the aid of persons there to capture the murderer. I had been thinking for hours how I should best prevent the new crime and hand over the perpetrator of the old one to justice: for I feared—alas! I feared that whatsoever I might say would be taken only as the ravings of a poor crazed creature!"

"We will at once adopt measures!" ejaculated Redcliffe. "Come with me! Henceforth you must not be a wanderer! Come——But first of all one instant's devotion *here!*"

Thus speaking, he threw himself upon his knees by the side of the grave of the unnamed one: he bent over the turf—he covered his face with his hands—and Jane, who stood at a short distance, could hear the convulsive sobs that came from his troubled breast. When he slowly arose from his suppliant posture, his countenance, as the moonlight fell upon it, was ghastly pale: but yet it was not convulsed—it now wore the expression of a deep, serene, resigned mournfulness.

He and Jane, issuing from the churchyard, proceeded together in the direction of the village; and while walking thither, Mr. Redcliffe asked, "Wherefore did you leave that asylum which I provided for you, and where the people, though in humble circumstances, were so kind and good to you?"

"Have I not said, Mr. Redcliffe," responded his companion, "that I felt there was a mission to be fulfilled—and that by me it must be accomplished? I knew that if I asked permission to leave that home which you provided for me, it would be refused; I therefore stole away, taking with me the contents of the purse you so generously left me. And then, on becoming a wanderer again, I procured for myself the mean apparel which became a wanderer's condition——"

"Enough, enough, Jane!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe. "I was wrong to question you on the subject: I should have comprehended how your unwearying devotion to the memory of your beloved mistress would have thus rendered you a wanderer until you had ascertained her fate. And I too have been a wanderer!" said Mr. Redcliffe,—"a wanderer for the same object—but latterly to seek for you likewise, since I learnt your sudden flight from the cottage near Liverpool. It was not accident—it was heaven itself that brought me to this secluded village, that I might meet with you, and through you learn the solution of that sad and long-enduring mystery!"

They now entered the village; and the landlord of the little inn was astonished when he beheld his new guest returning in the company of that strange and gipsy-like woman. But Mr. Redcliffe, at once making him an imperative sign to ask no questions, said, "Let your wife take charge of this female, and surround her with all possible attentions. Let suitable apparel be provided for her—treat her as you would treat a guest who flourished a well-filled purse before your eyes—but beware how you or any one belonging to you question her impertinently!"

The landlord bowed—and at once summoned his wife, whom Jane accompanied with the docile obedience of complete lucidity, as well as of a heart full of gratitude towards the author of this renewed kindness on her behalf.

"Now," said Mr. Redcliffe, "a word with you, landlord!"—and he beckoned the man into the parlour which he was occupying at the inn. "Have you the courage to accompany me," he inquired, "on a venture that will put one hundred pounds in your pocket?"

The landlord—who was a stout, powerfully built man, of about forty years of age—opened his eyes wide with astonishment; and then said, "A hundred pounds, sir? I have courage to do anything for such a reward."

"Then come with me," answered Redcliffe. "Procure a stout cord—breathe not a syllable to your wife—and the money will be yours. I will explain myself fully as we proceed."

But the landlord stood hesitating: he did not exactly know whether to believe that it was all right and straightforward or whether it were some lawless adventure into which his guest sought to drag him.

"A felon has escaped from the hands of justice," said Mr. Redcliffe quickly: "the Government has offered fifty pounds for his apprehension—the authorities of Liverpool a like sum—and all this reward shall be yours! Now will you accompany me?"

"Cheerfully, sir," answered the landlord, his hesitation vanishing in a moment: "and I beg your pardon——"

"Enough!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe. "Procure the cord—conceal it about your person—and follow me without delay. I shall walk slowly through the village in the direction of the churchyard."

"But would it not be better, sir," inquired the landlord, "to take pistols with us?"

"I have them," rejoined Mr. Redcliffe: and unlocking a mahogany case, he produced a pair of small double barrelled rifle pistols, which he at once secured about his person.

He then issued forth from the room; and leaving the inn, proceeded slowly along the street. In a few minutes he was joined by the landlord, who intimated that he had with him a cord which would effectually bind the miscreant's limbs when he should be captured. He carried in his hand a stout staff or bludgeon: but Mr. Redcliffe said to him, "We must take the man alive: it is not for us to anticipate the blow which justice has to deal."

"And if in self-defence?" said the landlord.

"That is different," replied Mr. Redcliffe.

"And pray who may this man be, sir?"

"You have heard of the dreadful murder at Liverpool several months back—you know probably that one of the assassins escaped——"

"What! the notorious Barney the Burker?" ejaculated the landlord.

"The very same," returned Redcliffe: "and doubtless you have seen him too. Know you the assistant of your sexton here?"

"Well," exclaimed the landlord, stopping suddenly short, "if I didn't always say that the fellow had the most hang-dog countenance——"

"Come quick!" exclaimed Redcliffe; "or another murder may be committed ere our object be accomplished."

They walked on together; and on coming within view of the old sexton's cottage, they perceived a light glimmering through one of the ground-floor windows. At that very instant the form of a man passed in front of that window, obscuring the light for a moment: and Redcliffe again said, "Come quick!"

The cottage stood in the midst of a little garden, separated by a low paling from the lane by which it was approached: the shed occupied by the Burker was in a yard at the back. The lane itself was bounded by a hedge, which ceased at the commencement of the paling;—and there, within the shade of that hedge, Mr. Redcliffe and the landlord paused to reconnoitre the premises. Some one was knocking at the door with his knuckles: they had no doubt it was the same person whom they had seen pass by the window—they suspected it might be the Burker—but they could not be sure, for there was a little portico formed with trellis-work and covered with jasmine, in the deep shade of which stood the person who was thus knocking at the cottage door.

The Burker however it was; and we will for the present follow him and his proceedings. His coat was buttoned around him; and beneath it he had a crowbar concealed. The fellow had thought to do his murderous work thus early in the night—for it was little more than half-past ten—in order that he might have many hours in which to place a considerable distance between himself and Woodbridge ere the foul deed should be discovered. As for Crazy Jane—if he found her not wandering in the neighbourhood after the accomplishment of the crime which he meditated, he would abandon his projects in respect to herself altogether, rather than waste valuable time and run additional risk by searching after her.

Barney the Burker knocked, as we have said, at Jonathan Carnabie's door. The old man was reading in his little parlour when the summons reached his ear; and taking up the light, he proceeded as far as the door—which he did not however open.

"Who is it?" he asked from within.

"It's me sir," replied the Burker; and his voice was heard by Mr. Redcliffe and the landlord—the latter of whom immediately recognising it (for he had on one occasion spoken to the man) intimated the same in a low hurried whisper to Mr. Redcliffe.

"Come," said this gentleman, also in a whispering tone, "let us creep stealthily along the paling:"—for he knew that if the fellow's suspicions were excited, he would at once turn and fly.

"And what do you want?" asked Jonathan Carnabie from within.

"There's a message just come down from the willage," responded the Burker; "and the boy which brought it is a-vaiting here to speak to you his-self."

"And how came you up at this hour?" inquired Jonathan, still without opening the door: not that the old man had any reason to suspect a sinister motive on the part of his assistant—but his long habit of self-seclusion, and perhaps the little circumstance that he really did possess a small hoard of gold, had rendered him particularly cautious.

"I didn't feel inclined to sleep," answered the Burker; "so I took a walk through the church-

yard to make sure there was no body-snatchers; and as I was a-coming back, I met this here little boy."

"All right!" answered Carnabie: and the door opening, the old man was discerned, carrying a candle in his hand.

The Burker at once pushed himself in: then there was a rush of footsteps immediately after him—the crow-bar dropped from beneath the coat which the miscreant, thus suddenly startled, had unbuttoned in readiness; and in the twinkling of an eye a pistol was levelled at his head, while in his ear resounded the terrible words, "Surrender, or you are a dead man!"

It was Mr. Redcliffe who had seized upon him with one hand, while with the other he presented the weapon. The landlord—who was either confused by the suddenness of the whole proceeding, or else whose vaunted courage became paralysed in a moment at the sight of the ferocious countenance of the Burker—fumbled to produce the cord from beneath his garments: but though close at his leader's heels, he did not render prompt succour in securing the villain. With one terrific howl of rage the Burker burst from Mr. Redcliffe's grasp, at the same time dashing from his hand the pistol—which instantaneously exploded, without however accomplishing any mischief. The dilatory or dastard landlord was dashed violently to the ground, as the Burker sped past with the fury and power of a mad bull.

"Stop—or I fire! I have another pistol!" ejaculated Redcliffe, who had not been hurled down, but merely thrust violently against the door-post.

The Burker made no response—nor did he obey the threatening mandate; but on he rushed with a speed that was almost incredible. Mr. Redcliffe pursued him, calling the landlord to join likewise in the chase. Without waiting to see whether he were obeyed, Mr. Redcliffe darted forward, at the same time drawing forth his remaining weapon, which he did not however immediately use. But finding that the assassin, goaded by his desperate circumstances, was fleeing more quickly than he was enabled to follow, he discharged one of the bullets of the double-barreled pistol, with the aim and intent of wounding the ruffian in the leg. The ball missed; and on sped Barney. The second bullet was sent flying after him: this likewise failed. But all of a sudden the river revealed itself in its quicksilver brightness to Mr. Redcliffe's view. He heard footsteps behind him—a glance thrown over his shoulder, showed him that the landlord was following—and he exclaimed, "Quick; quick! he is in our power!"

But the next moment the Burker plunged into the river. His dark form was seen for a moment struggling amidst the eddies which his leap had thus created; and then it disappeared from the view. A very little lower down, a row of trees skirted each bank, overhanging the river so far as to shut out the clear starlight, and thus throw all that portion of the stream for a couple of hundred yards into the deepest, blackest gloom. Redcliffe and the landlord hurried along the bank, straining their eyes to peep through the dense foliage and catch a glimpse if possible of the waters beneath—but all in vain. Neither heard they any sound like that of a struggling or battling form in those waters; and amidst that depth of gloom they ran to and fro along the bank within and beyond the range of the trees,—Redcliffe being ready at the first appearance of the Burker to spring in and grapple with him. But no farther trace was discovered of the murderer.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

THE FOUR SYRENS.

THE scene changes to the sumptuous establishment of Madame Angelique in London; and we must again introduce our readers to the apartment which communicated by means of the mirror-contrived door with the Frenchman's house adjoining.

In this room we shall find four beautiful girls, as on the first occasion when the reader was initiated in the mysteries of this temple of voluptuousness: but of these present four, *two* were new importations to the Frenchwoman's house of fashionable infamy. Armantine, the French girl, was still there: Linda, the German girl, was likewise still an inmate of the same place:—the other two have yet to be described. All four were exquisitely dressed in evening toilet: their charms were displayed—we can scarcely say to the utmost advantage, for *this* implies a consistency with that modesty without which beauty loses half its fascination: but those lovely contours of bust were exposed in a manner that left but little more to be revealed. And as if too by that which was originally a study, but which had now become a habit, the attitudes of those four girls were full of a voluptuous abandonment: so that if they had been sitting to an artist who sought to depict four different personifications of luxurious sensuousness, they could not possibly have chosen better positions—nor could better models have been selected.

Yet there was nothing of the absolute grossness of the ordinary houses of infamy, nor of the manner of their inmates, discernible in that room nor on the part of those four young women. The furniture was all sumptuous—luxurious too, even to the carrying-out of oriental ideas of such luxury: but no immodest pictures were suspended to the walls—it might have been a room in any palatial mansion the respectability of which was above the breath of scandal. Besides, there was an elegance of taste and an air of refinement presiding over the entire appointments of the room; while the sideboard was covered with the choicest wines and the most delicate confectionary, as well as a variety of fruits—but there was no eager rushing on the part of the young females to this sideboard; and the tempting refreshments remained there comparatively unheeded,—thus evidencing that the inmates of the room were accustomed to these and all other luxuries.

Then, as for the attitudes of the girls themselves, it is true that, as we have already said, they were replete with a voluptuous abandonment, and the charms of those lovely creatures were most meretriciously displayed. Still, even here there was a gloss of refinement over all—an elegant polish which showed that they had all been ladies once, in the common acceptance of the term, whatever name they merited now. The good-breeding which from their infancy was their's, was discernible in their manners: there was nothing improper in their discourse—nor had their looks the bold hardihood of a gross and vulgar harlotry. For a scene of iniquity, it was certainly one of the most fascinating that could possibly be presented to the view; and certainly the best composed and the best appointed in all its details within the limits of the modern Babylon. But then Madame Angelique had ever taken great pride in what she was presumptuous enough to style the "respectability" of her establishment; and as she treated the young women like ladies, and enforced the same demeanour on the part of the female domestics towards them, they on their own part had a certain pride in maintaining a suitable decorum of conversation and manners amongst themselves.

We will now go a little more into detail. Linda, the German girl, was reclining upon an Ottoman, negligently toying with her fair tresses,—her naked arms and almost completely bared bosom exhibiting the stainless white of a lovely complexion. There was an unspeakable langour about her entire form; and her sensuous abandonment of attitude was displayed with all its most ravishingly dangerous characteristics. Armantine, the French girl—with her dark glossy hair arranged in bands, and she herself perhaps the least meretriciously attired of the whole four—looking, too, more sweetly and pensively lovely, though lovelier as to actual charms she was not, for it were impossible to award the palm to any one in particular,—Armantine, we say, was placed in a settee near the German girl, with whom she principally conversed.

In a large cushioned chair, languishingly reclined the third of these syrens,—a full-grown beauty, though still quite youthful, and with all the freshness of youth blooming upon her rich luxuriant charms. There was an air of sensuous indolence about this girl which was different from that of the German: it was the waking dreaminess of a luxurious temperament that appeared to be softly abandoning itself to voluptuous reveries. She was a native of England, and had only recently passed from the keeping of a nobleman,—who first seduced her from a genteel and happy home,—into Madame Angelique's fashionable temple of infamy. But no remorse had she on account of the home she had left—or at least, if such a feeling were really in her bosom, she displayed it not: for blended with that air of sensuous lassitude—an air which might be described as luxurious wantonness at rest—was an expression of listless, placid contentment. She had light hair and blue eyes: milk and roses combined to form her complexion: she had full moist luscious lips—beautiful teeth—and a form which without being exuberant to fatness, was full, fleshy, but of perfectly symmetrical proportions. She answered to the Christian name of Marion.

Upon the back of the chair in which Marion thus negligently reclined—or rather, in which she reposed—leant a tall slender girl, of sylphid shape, and with such exquisite elegance and grace in all her attitudes and movements, that in the days of her virtue she must have been a veritable star in the midst of the brightest galaxy that ever thronged in a ball-room. She had brown hair, remarkably luxuriant in its mass of silken softness, and with a rich natural gloss upon it. Her features were perfectly faultless: her age did not exceed seventeen: she also was an English girl—and she bore the beautiful name of Eglantine. Alas, that one endowed with such loveliness of form and with such mental accomplishments as she possessed—bearing too a name so sweet to be murmured by the lips of pure, chaste, and honourable love—alas, that she should have fallen from virtue's pinnacle and sunk into this degradation, gilded though it were!

Linda, Armantine, Marion, and Eglantine were together in their sumptuous apartment, between nine and ten o'clock in the evening; and they were conversing on various topics, just as four ladies might do in their own drawing-room. Presently the mirror-contrived door opened: the four syrens turned their eyes slowly to see who was about to enter,—when an individual who was a stranger to them all, made his appearance. He was flashily dressed, but had a vulgar look; and as he took off his hat, he made a most ridiculous attempt at a bow to the young women; so that Armantine and Eglantine could not help laughing—while Linda and Marion so far exerted themselves in their luxurious indolence as to sit up and survey him with more attention.

"Good evening, ladies," said this individual, closing the mirror-door behind him, and advancing with an impudent leering smirk towards those whom he thus addressed. "Don't be alarmed. Perhaps you know me by name—and perhaps you don't. So if the old lady"—thus irreverently, as the girls thought, alluding to Madame Angelique—"hasn't done me the honour of mentioning me to you before, I may as well announce myself as Mr. Isaac Shadbolt. Honest Ike, as my friends Sir Richard Mayne and Colonel Rowan call me!"

"Why, I do believe," whispered Marion to her companions, "he alludes to the Commissioners of Police. When I lived with Lord Beltinge, I frequently heard those names mentioned."

"Well, yes, Miss," said Mr. Shadbolt, whose ears were uncommonly keen, and who had caught a portion of that whisper,—"the gentlemen *are* the Commissioners of Police; and I have the honour to serve under them. Not one of your common vulgar policemen, you know—but a sort ot subaltern—what an Ensign or Lieutenant is in a regiment in comparison with the Colonel."

It was tolerably easy to perceive that Mr. Shadbolt had been drinking—not merely because his countenance was flushed, his speech was rather thick, and his gait a trifle unsteady—but likewise because the hitherto delicately perfumed atmosphere of the apartment had become impregnated, on this individual's entrance, with an odour of rum, as if he had dropped into two or three wine-vaults in his way, previous to making the present call.

"And pray what do you want, sir?" inquired Marion, now abandoning her voluptuous indolence as much as it was in her sensuously languishing nature to throw it off;—"what *do* you want?" she repeated: for having recently come from beneath aristocratic protection, she was the first to resent the vulgar intrusion.

"Did you ask me, Miss, what I would take to drink?" said Mr. Shadbolt, with police-court ease and station-house familiarity. "I have got a *detective* eye for whatever's good: trust honest Ike Shadbolt for *that!*"—and then he burst out into a loud guffaw at the witticism borrowed from his professional avocations, but the humour of which was lost to the young ladies, who were now all four full of indignation, surprise, and disgust.

Mr. Shadbolt however, nothing abashed, advanced towards the sideboard, and deliberately filled a tumbler with claret—for it was the habit of this exceedingly independent gentleman scornfully to eschew small glasses; and having slowly poured the somewhat copious libation down his throat, he gave a long sigh of pleasure. Then, having thus refreshed himself internally, he relieved his amatory feelings by nodding with a familiar leer at Marion—blowing a kiss from the tips of his fingers to Linda—smirking at Armantine—and extending his arms invitingly towards Eglantine. The young ladies, however, relished these pantomimic displays as little as might be: and they exchanged amongst themselves fresh looks of indignation and disgust. Mr. Shadbolt only laughed; and now with a huge slice of cake in one hand, and a quarter of a pine-apple in the other, he leant against the side-board, feeding deliberately and still bestowing his glances of tender familiarity on the four houris.

"This is too disgusting!" said Marion. "Eglantine dear, you are nearest—ring the bell——hard! hard!"

"Do if you like," said Mr. Shadbolt: "but depend upon it the old dowager"—thus again irreverently alluding to Madame Angelique—"will give me a most welcome reception. Why, Lord love you all, you sweet creatures! how do you think I could be here in any possible way unless I was one of the privileged? And where is not honest Ike Shadbolt welcome, I should just like for to know?"

Miss Eglantine,—thinking there must be more or less truth in the man's words, having the term "police" still ringing ominously in her ear, and afraid of angering one who made himself as completely at home as if he had a conscious right to do so,—forbore from pulling the bell; and whispered to Marion, "Had we not better see what he really wants? Perhaps he will explain himself? M. Bertin would scarcely have let him up unless he had full authority from madame."

"Come, sir," said Marion, authoritatively, "explain."

"An explanation of my conduct is quickly given, my dears," said Mr. Shadbolt; "and all the quicker too, since I see that with regular female curiosity you are all four burning to know what brings your humble servant and ever faithful admirer to this here saloon. There are several reasons. In the first place, I knew very well I should have the pleasure—or at least stand the chance, of meeting some of the sweetest young creatures in all England. In the second plaee, I knew that the claret was super-excellent and the port stunning. In the third place, I had an eye to the cake and fruit. And in the fourth place, my dears, I have a little private business of a very particular character with the amiable old dowager."

The girls could scarcely repress a smile at the consummate impudence—the cool free-and-easy independence of Mr. Isaac Shadbolt; and even the proud Marion suffered her moist red lips to part sufficiently to reveal the brilliancy of her teeth. Mr. Shadbolt continued to leer familiarly at the syrens, while he demolished the cake and the pineapple; and then he helped himself to another tumbler full of wine.

"And now," he said, "that I've refreshed myself a bit, I should take it as civil if either of you young ladies would just show me where I shall find the old dowager."

"We will ring for a servant," said Eglantine, now once more extending her snowy, beautifully modelled arm towards the bell-pull.

"Stop, my dear!" exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt: "it is not worth while to trouble the slaveys—it would only throw the old lady into a flutter if we were to use so much ceremony, because she knows who I am. Just take the trouble to show me the way yourself; and if we do happen to pass through a dark passage together, I won't snatch a kiss—— Oh, no! not I indeed!"—and then Mr. Shadbolt was lost for the next half-minute in a series of nods, winks, and amatory leers.

Eglantine consulted Marion with a glance; and the latter said in a loud haughty tone, "This scene must positively end, my dear. Ring the bell, and have done with it."

"Perhaps I had better not," whispered Eglantine: "it might only annoy and frighten madame, as this man has already intimated:"—then hastening towards Shadbolt, she said, "Come—follow me."

The detective-officer, bowing after his own free-and-easy fashion to the other three young ladies, accompanied Miss Eglantine,—who conducted him to Madame Angelique's boudoir, taking very good care however to keep sufficiently in advance so as to avoid any practical familiarity which Mr. Shadbolt might in his amatory playfulness think fit to exhibit. Madame Angelique was alone in her luxuriously furnished room: the detective-officer was introduced thither; and Eglantine flitted back to the saloon, to communicate to her companions how startled and dismayed the mistress of the establishment looked when Mr. Shadbolt entered the boudoir.

And such indeed was the case. A cold tremor swept through the form of the Frenchwoman, whose conscience for some time past had been so uneasy, and who constantly experienced a sensation as if some fearful calamity would suddenly explode storm-like upon her head. The detective bowed with the air of one who had no necessity to await a welcome greeting, but who felt that he exercised an influence, or indeed an authority, which would ensure him a most civil reception, no matter what the real feeling of the mistress of the house might be.

"Sit down, Mr. Shadbolt—pray be seated," said Madame Angelique, as soon as she had sufficiently recovered from the first shock of terror to be enabled to give utterance to a word: but still her limbs were all trembling, and her voice was full of a nervous trepidation. "I thought—I thought—that is, you led me to believe—that—that it would be a long, long time——"

"Before you saw my beautiful visage again?" added Mr. Shadbolt, with his wonted flippancy. "Well, I believe, ma'am," he continued, as he leisurely smoothed down the ruffled nap of his hat with his coat-sleeve, "I did intimate something of the sort——"

"Yes—and you know," interjected Madame Angelique, eagerly, "I was to give you a hundred a-year—and I am sure, Mr. Shadbolt——But perhaps you have got bad news? perhaps something else has turned up?"

"Well, ma'am, I am sorry to say that such is the case," rejoined the officer. "There isn't a more delicate-minded man in all the world than honest Ike Shadbolt—or one who has more regard for a lady's feelings: I am as tender as a chicken in that respect——But there's persons higher in authority than even Ike Shadbolt."

"I understand!" said Madame Angelique, with a shudder: "you mean the Commissioners of Police?"

"Well, ma'am, I did just allude to those gentlemen," answered the detective. "Now, the long and short of the matter is, they have received another intimation about your house——"

"Oh, Mr. Shadbolt!" cried the Frenchwoman, wringing her hands in despair; "I offered to wall up the unfortunate door—or to give up my business in respect to the young ladies, and attend only to the millinery——or even——But you told me so positively that I need do nothing of the sort!"

"And I only told you ma'am," interrupted Shadbolt, "what I thought at the time. But circumstances may alter—and they *have* altered. Immediately after my former visit, I reported to the Commissioners that you had faithfully promised to do all you have just been saying; and they appeared satisfied. I thought that it would all end pleasantly—that they would leave the matter in my hands—and that as long as I made no additional report, they would take it for granted I was keeping a look-out on you, and you were doing all that was necessary. But behold you! this afternoon I was summoned to Scotland

Yard—that's the office of the Commissioners, you know—and was desired to see how you were getting on, but without holding the slightest communication with you. Now, don't flurry yourself, ma'am——you'll see I'm acting a friendly part towards you: but the truth is, the Commissioners have been in private communication with the parochial authorities—and—and—these authorities are going to—to—prosecute you. So I'm come to get evidence——"

A half-stifled shriek came from the lips of the wretched Frenchwoman; and as she fell back in her chair as if she were about to go off in a fit, Mr. Shadbolt very considerately filled a glass with wine and held it to her lips: but as she only shook her head impatiently, and waved him off, he drank it himself,—coolly observing "that it was a pity it should be wasted."

"What, in the name of heaven, am I to do?" cried Madame Angelique, wringing her hands. "Do advise me, Mr. Shadbolt! You will find I shall be grateful! What am I to do? Shall I send off the young ladies at once? shall I shut up the house? I have already thought of all this—but——"

"Look here, ma'am," said the officer; "be calm and cool—we will discuss the matter quietly and comfortably—and I dare say you can get out of the business pleasantly enough in the long run."

"Ah!" said Madame Angelique, with a long sigh of relief: "I thought you would not leave me to be sent to prison——to be ruined——"

"Not a bit of it!" ejaculated Shadbolt. "Answer me a question or two. I suppose you are pretty warm—I mean you have got plenty of money? and if you was to cut this business you wouldn't quite have to go into the work-house? Come, ma'am—tell the truth," added the officer, seeing that she hesitated how to reply: "tell the truth, I say, if you want the advice of honest Ike Shadbolt."

"Well, then," responded the Frenchwoman, "I certainly could retire from business with a tolerable competency if I chose: and indeed I had some thoughts of doing so after your previous visit. Only——"

"Only what?" inquired Shadbolt.

"Only I fancied," added Madame Angelique, "that I was the object of such bitter persecution on the part of that lady at Bayswater whom you and I spoke about, that she would pursue me wherever I went—and that it therefore little mattered where I might be or what I did—for that it would always come to the same thing——I mean that I should ever have to stand on the defensive against her."

While Madame Angelique was thus speaking, Shadbolt passed his hand slowly across his forehead with the air of one who was reflecting in a sort of half-bewilderment, and who was striving to collect his ideas.

"What lady at Bayswater?" he at length said.

"Did you not tell me the last time you were here," inquired Madame Angelique quickly, "that the information was given to the Commissioners by an Indian lady——"

"If I did then, I was drunk," interrupted Shadbolt. "Ah! by the bye, I *do* recollect now, that you pressed me upon the point. You had got some crotchet in your head; and perhaps I thought it best at the time to leave you in the dark—or more likely still, I was really in total ignorance myself——"

"Then it is not the Lady Indora who is persecuting me?" exclaimed the Frenchwoman eagerly.

"I don't believe the lady you speak of has anything to do in the business," interjected Shadbolt. "The truth is, a lawyer in Bedford Row, Holborn—one Coleman by name—but who has a private house in this parish, is at the bottom of the whole affair; and from all I can learn, he has addressed the Commissioners most seriously on the subject. Indeed, there's no use disguising the fact—he says he is employed for a wealthy client of his who also lives in the parish, but who chooses to keep in the back-ground."

"Mr. Coleman, a solicitor?" said Madame Angelique, musing reflectively: "I never heard of him. But then it is true gentlemen often come to my house under feigned names——"

"And gather a great many particulars," added Mr. Shadbolt significantly. "Now, you see, ma'am, I am dealing candidly with you. The truth is, the Commissioners know that you are not very particular how you entice young girls away from their homes, or even have them carried off by force. They also know that a certain Lettice Rodney who was tried at Liverpool, belonged to your establishment——"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Madame Angelique.

"They know too," continued Shadbolt, "that at the time when she got into all her troubles, she was going to Ireland on your business—to wheedle back a certain Eveleen O'Brien——"

"Then Lettice must have betrayed everything!" cried the Frenchwoman bitterly.

"I can't say who betrayed it," proceeded Shadbolt: "all I know is, that this is the information given to the Commissioners by Mr. Coleman the lawyer. But there's more still to come. It is known you have agents in different parts of the country to look out for young girls and pick them up for your customers who may themselves reside in the country. Now, what was that affair about a certain Isabella Vincent, who was carried off from a farm-house somewhere in Kent, down to Ramsgate?"

"Heavens! what, is this known too?" cried the Frenchwoman. "Well, it was certainly done by agents of mine——"

"Well, then, you see that it *is* known," proceeded Shadbolt. "And then there's something else too. Ah! and now I know why you talk of a lady at Bayswater! Did you not have some young person—a Miss Ashton, I think—carried off from a villa down in that neighbourhood?—and she was rescued by a young nobleman——"

"All this is true!" exclaimed Madame Angelique: and then in a musing manner she added, "But if the Lady Indora gave the information about Christina Ashton, how could she possibly know all the other circumstances?"

"You may be quite satisfied," answered Shadbolt, "that this Indian lady of whom you are talking has nothing to do with the business: so it is no use running your head any longer against that post. I tell you that it all comes from Coleman the lawyer, who is acting for a rich client behind the scenes. Well, you see, ma'am, these circumstances I have been mentioning—and others that are known to the Commissioners—have made the matter serious enough. Your enemies are too powerful—and they will break up your establishment for you, if you don't break it up for yourself. You say you are pretty warm: why not retire at once? Go to France."

Madame Angelique looked bewildered; and in the confusion of her thoughts she was led to confess that on account of certain incidents with regard to the decoying of young women from France, Belgium, and some of the German States, it would be very inconvenient, or even perilous, for her to set foot on the Continent at all.

"Well then, remain in England," ejaculated Mr. Shadbolt. "Now I will show you how the matter stands. There is to be a prosecution, if my report shows that there is evidence to support it. Of course the Commissioners think that I come here only as a spy, and not to give you any private advice. They imagine that whatever I told them after my first visit here, was only gleaned in the course of conversation—and not on account of any private understanding betwixt you and me. They believe they can rely upon me: and so they have sent me here again on this present occasion. Now, I need not make my report for a day or two—I can pretend that I had other business—or that I could not obtain admission. To-morrow therefore you can dismiss the girls——"

"And give up the establishment!" added Madame Angelique, in a decided tone: for her mind was now relieved in more ways than one, and she was enabled to breathe more freely than she had done for some time past.

"Why break up the millinery part of the establishment?" inquired Shadbolt. "I did not mean that."

"The millinery branch," responded the Frenchwoman, "is nothing in comparison with the other. Though I have plenty of custom, yet what with long credit, and some of the highest families never thinking of paying at all—what with the expenses too——Besides, Mr. Shadbolt," added the milliner, in a tone of confidence, "half my lady-customers would leave me the moment this house ceased to be one of accommodation. So it is decided!—I give up everything, and I retire on my means. As for the girls, I know where to place them at once——And," added the Frenchwoman to herself, "I can turn a last penny by each of them."

"Well then, retire!" exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt; "and when you are out of business, I will show you how to make more money than ever you have done while in it."

"You?" ejaculated Madame Angelique.

"Yes, I—even I, honest Ike Shadbolt! But no matter now; you shall know all when the time comes. Go and settle down in some comfortable place—some pretty little villa on the outskirts—and make yourself as happy as the day is long. I shall come back here in the course of the week, and shall then report to the Commissioners that the establishment is broken up—that the girls are all gone—and that the tailor next door has bricked up the means of communication between the two houses. So there will be an end of prosecutions and all other unpleasantness. And now, my dear madam, if you think all this advice of mine, and all the good I am going to do you, is worth anything——"

"Oh, to be sure," ejaculated Madame Angelique, who, though she comprehended all the selfishness of Shadbolt's disposition, was nevertheless but too glad to secure his good offices.

A liberal gratuity was therefore placed in his hand: and he took his departure,—the Frenchwoman not thinking it necessary to allow him to retrace his way through the saloon, but ringing the bell for the liveried footman to show him out by the front door of her own house.

About ten minutes afterwards the Duke of Marchmont was announced.

CHAPTER LXXXVII.

THE MILLINER AND THE DUKE.

THE Duke, whose countenance was pale and careworn, and who by his looks had evidently suffered much of late, endeavoured to put on the smile of gracious affability as he entered the luxurious apartment where Madame Angelique was seated. It occurred to him that she bowed somewhat more distantly than was her wont—or at least with an air of greater independance, if not actually commingled with coldness. He threw himself upon a seat—glanced at her for a moment, as if to assure himself whether there were really any studied change in her manner—and then he said, "Well, my able friend, assistant, and accomplice, have you thought of any fresh project——".

"I have just decided, my lord," responded Madame Angelique, "upon a most serious and important one."

"Indeed!" ejaculated the Duke eagerly. "And it is this that gives you such an air of mingled gravity and confidence? It is one, therefore, that will rid you—or perhaps I may say *us*—for ever from all fear of vindictive persecution at the hands of Indora?"

"I no longer fear her persecutions, my lord," rejoined the Frenchwoman; and her tone was now unmistakeably cold, while her manner was stiff.

"I do not understand you!" exclaimed the Duke, not knowing what to think. "Has anything happened to Indora? has anything been done? Have you in your astuteness devised something better than the aid of Sagoonah's dagger or a reptile from the Zoological Gardens?"

"Heaven be thanked," cried the Frenchwoman, "that neither the steel blade nor the serpent did the work of death! My conscience is at least not burthened with that crime."

"Then what do you mean?" asked the nobleman, now completely bewildered, and alarmed likewise by whatsoever appeared strangely sinister in the otherwise incomprehensible look, tone, and manner of Madame Angelique. "What is this project on which you have decided?"

"To break up my establishment altogether—retire into a pleasant little villa—and live in comfort for the rest of my days, apart from all intrigues and the perils thereof."

The Duke of Marchmont was astounded. As the reader is aware, he was in mortal dread of the

Princess Indora: he had the most cogent reasons for destroying her life, so that he might silence her for ever; and here was the hitherto useful and willing agent of whom he had made a tool for the purpose of carrying out his fell design,—here she was, we say, suddenly slipping out of his hands!

"You surely cannot be serious?" he at length faltered out; "you would not abandon a business—pardon me, an avocation—which is so lucrative?"

"And which makes me the dupe of others!" rejoined Madame Angelique, with emphatic tone and significant look.

"What mean you?" inquired Marchmont. "Your words seem pointed—and yet to one who has always been your friend——"

"You have paid me, my lord, for the services which I have rendered," answered Madame Angelique; "and on that score we are quits. But you have endeavoured to render me your instrument in the accomplishment of a deed from which I now recoil with horror,—yes, and even with wonder that I could have ever contemplated it! With all the arts of sophistry you led me to believe that I incurred the most terrific dangers at Indora's hands——"

"And had you not the proof?" inquired the Duke, vainly endeavouring to conceal the bitter vexation and even the terror which he experienced. "Did not an agent of the police——"

"Yes—he came, certainly; but I was altogether mistaken as to the origin of his visit. In one word, my Lord Duke, the Lady Indora has nothing to do with this proceeding on the part of the Commissioners of Police: it all emanates from some wealthy person in the back-ground, who acts through the medium of his attorney, Mr. Coleman."

"Coleman—Coleman?" said the Duke, thus repeating the name in a musing tone. "Surely I have heard it before—and somewhat recently too. Coleman? Ah! I recollect!—it is that lawyer who has been advancing Armytage such considerable sums of money!"

"Do you then know anything of this Mr. Coleman, my lord?" inquired the Frenchwoman. "But it matters not——My mind is made up how to act. I am this evening more at ease than for a long time past I have been; and never—never will I again suffer myself to be beguiled by the representations of one who was all the time endeavouring to serve his own purposes."

"You allude to me," ejaculated the Duke, assuming an air of indignation; "and you wrong me! I thought you in danger from that quarter——"

"Well, well, my lord, we will not dispute the point," interrupted Madame Angelique: and then she ironically added, "I have no doubt your Grace will now congratulate me on having acquired the certainty that I am no longer in any peril from that quarter?"

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Marchmont; "if it really is so. But beware, my good friend, how you suffer yourself to be lulled into a false security. It is at such times that the blow falls heaviest——"

"Thank you, my lord," interrupted the milliner, "I am fully prepared to meet all contingencies of that sort. To-morrow I dismiss the girls—or rather I find them protectors, as their kind and excellent friend who stands in the light of their mother ought to do."

Madame Angelique chuckled at her own disgusting levity—and the Duke for an instant bit his lip with vexation. He saw that the milliner was resolute in the plan she had proclaimed: he saw too how hopeless it was to attempt to enlist her services any farther in the prosecution of his designs; and he likewise felt how necessary it was to keep on friendly terms with her. A seal must be placed upon her lips in respect to all that had recently occurred; and though for her own sake she would keep silent on those points, yet it by no means suited the Duke's interests that she should speak disparagingly of him in any other sense.

"Well, my dear madam," he accordingly said, assuming his blandest tone and his most affable look, "I do indeed congratulate you on this change in your position—I am glad you have reason to feel so confident in respect to the Lady Indora. And now, as you are about to retire into private life, if there be anything I can do——"

"Yes—there is something," responded Madame Angelique. "The four girls must be comfortably provided for: I mean to leave off business with a good character—and those charmers of mine must not go forth into the world to proclaim what I have been. So little has actually transpired in respect to the true character of this house, that the public in general will give me credit for being a respectable milliner who is retiring on a fortune legitimately obtained."

"To be sure, my dear madam!" ejaculated Marchmont; "you will keep your own counsel with respect to the past—you will provide for the girls, so as to seal their lips; and those friends who have so long patronised your establishment—myself amongst the number—will of course do the best to sustain your respectability by their good report."

"I expect nothing less at their hands," answered Madame Angelique; "and I purpose to test the sincerity of the friendship of four of my principal patrons. To begin therefore with your Grace, I give you your choice of the four young ladies in the saloon."

"Commend me to Eglantine!" exclaimed Marchmont, who at once saw the necessity of yielding to that which was in reality a command on the part of the Frenchwoman. "To-morrow I will take handsome apartments somewhere for Eglantine—I will let you know the address in the course of the day—and she can then remove thither."

"Eglantine must prove an exception from the choice," answered Madame Angelique. "I had forgotten at the moment that I have a particular way of disposing of her. Either of the other three——"

"It is impossible, my dear madam," interrupted the Duke, "that I can take either Armantine or Linda, who have been so long beneath your roof, and who are so well known amongst all your patrons! I should be laughed at—ridiculed——"

"Then why not Marion?" demanded the Frenchwoman. "And now I bethink me, I can place Armantine and Linda equally as well as I can Eglantine. Therefore, my lord, it must be Marion."

"But, my dear Madame Angelique!" said the Duke; "in the first place I believe that Marion dislikes me—you remember I have complained to you of her refusal——"

"Mere coyness on her part—or else artifice and stratagem to render herself all the more acceptable when she might choose to surrender."

"But there is another reason!" exclaimed the Duke.

"Is this your friendship?" cried Madame Angelique, with a great show of indignation, and half starting from her seat.

"Do not be angry!—we were but discussing the point——"

"And it is no longer open for discussion. Take Marion or not, as you think fit," continued the Frenchwoman: "but if you refuse, I shall know what value to set upon the friendship of your Grace."

Marchmont bit his lip almost till the blood came: Madame Angelique's look was resolutely decisive; and not daring to quarrel with her, he affected to laugh,—saying, "Well, well, I suppose, like all ladies, you must have your own way! So let it be the particular beauty whom you have thus allotted to me."

"Be it so: it is settled, my lord," replied Madame Angelique. "I have not the slightest doubt that Marion, who has been under the protection of an Earl, will feel proud in the long run to own the tender friendship of a Duke."

There was a slight accent of sarcasm in the milliner's tone: for she was avenging herself, as far as she thought fit, for the conduct of Marchmont in having duped her into becoming the instrument of his own designs, incomprehensible to the French woman though they were, in respect to Indora. The Duke, comprehending Madame Angelique's meaning, again bit his lip with vexation: but bowing to conceal it, he issued from the room.

On leaving the milliner's house, the Duke of Marchmont walked slowly along the street, plunged in a deep and painful reverie. He had numerous sources of bitter vexation as well as of alarm; and amongst the former the arrangement just made—or rather just enforced, in respect to Marion, was not the least. He knew that she had been the mistress of the Earl of Beltinge; and he by no means relished the idea of taking up with that nobleman's discarded paramour. The expense of keeping Marion entered not for a moment into his consideration: for he was wealthy enough to gratify any such fantasy if he had the inclination. But even in the sphere of vice and immorality, the haughty tone of aristocratic feeling prevails; and Marchmont winced at the idea that he, a Duke, should be compelled to take under his protection the cast-off mistress of an Earl. Were she the discarded paramour of a King, a Prince, or even a Royal Duke, it would have been different. Such was the sensitiveness of a man who hesitated not to make a familiar companion of a woman like Madame Angelique, the keeper of a fashionable house of infamy,—a man too who would have plunged himself into crime to rid his path of an enemy, like Indora, who, as he had reason to believe, was by some means or another threatening his security.

As the Duke of Marchmont was continuing his way slowly, and in deep brooding thoughtfulness, along the street, he encountered some one who suddenly addressed him by name;—and looking up, he beheld the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

"My lord, I greet you,' said that unprincipled individual, in a tone of familiarity.

"Ah! so you have returned from Paris?" observed the Duke, somewhat coldly.

"Yes—where I am sorry to say," responded Stanhope, "I fell in with persons who were cleverer than myself; and the consequence is I am as completely cleared out as ever an unfortunate devil was. I was just thinking to whom I could apply for a little friendly succour, when behold! fortune throws me in the way of your Grace."

"Then your pocket, I presume, is empty?" said the Duke, speaking slowly and in a musing manner: for he was revolving in his mind something that had just occurred to him.

"So empty," rejoined Stanhope, "that the introduction of such a thing as fifty guineas into that pocket of mine would be a veritable god-send. May I anticipate that for old acquaintance sake ——and you must remember, my lord, that if that affair with her Grace down at Oaklands ended in failure——"

"It was not your fault, I admit," returned the Duke: "but you must also recollect that I gave you a liberal reward. Enough, however, on that point! I think I can do something for you now. What would you say if I were to introduce you to-morrow to a handsome suite of apartments—a beautiful girl already installed there as the genius of the scene—and with an account opened at a banker's in your name to the extent of five hundred pounds?"

"I should say, my lord," replied Stanhope, "that it was a truly ducal manner in getting rid of a mistress of whom your Grace is tired—and that I am so overwhelmed by the favour I at once accept it."

"Then it is a bargain," said Marchmont; "and here is an earnest thereof," he added, slipping his purse into Stanhope's hand. "Come to me to-morrow evening——But no! do not make your appearance in Belgrave Square——Dine with me at the Clarendon Hotel at seven o'clock—and after our wine I will conduct you to the little paradise where a houri's arms will be open to receive you."

"I shall be punctual, my lord," answered Wilson Stanhope. "But one word! Is not this great favour which you are showing me, the prelude to something else?"

"What mean you?" inquired Marchmont: but the tone in which the question was put, convinced Stanhope that his surmise was correct.

"Let me speak frankly, my lord," he said. "I asked for fifty pounds—and you proffer me five hundred. Is this really nothing more than a recompense for taking your cast-off mistress——"

"On my soul, she is no mistress of mine!" interrupted the Duke. "I have seen her—I have joked with her—but never beyond such companionship has any familiarity been permitted by her. I have endeavoured——But enough! Suffice it for you to know that she has been the mistress of Beltinge—that she is now at Madame Angelique's—and that to-morrow she will be in handsome apartments, ready to receive you."

"Good, my lord!" ejaculated Stanhope. "But

still I think there is something that lies beyond all this. You require my services in another way—and you are giving me the retaining fee?"

"And if it be so?" said the Duke pointedly.

"You will find me ready and willing as before. Only let me know at once, that I may shape my arrangements accordingly."

"Then shape them," answered the Duke, "according to the impression you have received—and perhaps I may be more explicit to-morrow evening."

With these words Marchmont hastened away: but scarcely had he entered the next street, when he beheld Mr. Armytage proceeding slowly a little way in front of him. The Duke immediately overtook him: but ere he spoke a word, he caught a sufficient glimpse of his countenance to indicate that the speculator was occupied in no very agreeable reflections.

"I am afraid the world goes not well with you, Travers?" began the Duke.

"Travers?" echoed Armytage, starting: "how imprudent you are, my lord."

"I forgot," said the Duke: "it was indeed imprudent. But is my surmise correct? does the world still go indifferently with you? I need however scarcely ask," added his Grace, with a slight accent of vexation, "for you did not keep faith with me, Armytage—though I plainly told you that it would inconvenience me seriously if you were to fail."

"And perhaps I have been inconvenienced still more," said Armytage gruffly.

"It was not altogether well of you," resumed the Duke. "Upwards of five weeks have elapsed since you borrowed that last sum of twenty-five thousand pounds, with the assurance that in a few days you would be enabled to return it, as by taking up certain bills your credit would be good for fifty thousand. Was not that the way in which you put the matter to me?"

whole of one foot and half the other in the grave—deaf, and in his dotage—this nobleman had nevertheless only just returned from an embassy at one of the principal Continental courts after an absence from England of some five or six years.

Lord Wenham—for such was his denomination—had been an old patron of Madame Angelique previous to his appointment to the embassy above alluded to: he was therefore well initiated in the mysteries of her household—but the four young ladies whom the private part of her establishment now contained, were complete strangers to him. She had heard of his recent return to the British metropolis; and being resolved to make a last penny out of him before she gave up business altogether, she had written him the note which now brought him into her presence.

"Why, my dear Madame Angelique," mumbled the old lord, as he deposited himself in an easy chair—an effort which raised so violent a fit of coughing that for upwards of a minute it seemed as if his enervated frame must be shattered to pieces,—"I vow and protest that you look—ugh! ugh!—this cough of mine!—younger than when I last saw you."

"And yet, my lord," responded the milliner, "the lapse of five years can scarcely make one look younger——"

"Ah, very good! very good!" said Lord Wenham, laughing with a chuckle that was hideous as a death-rattle. "Yes, yes—in spite of five years you find me looking—ugh! ugh!—younger also?"—for be it observed that on account of his deafness he had not caught the precise terms of the milliner's speech.

"You look so young, my lord," exclaimed Madame Angelique, taking advantage of the little error into which he had fallen, and now speaking loud enough to make herself heard, "that I am convinced you are as terrible amongst the fair sex as ever!"

"Ah, ah! I understand," said Lord Wenham: "you have got—ugh! ugh!—some sweet creature that you mean to tempt me with—eh? eh?—ugh! ugh!"

"Fully esteeming your lordship's kind patronage," rejoined Madame Angelique, "before you went as Ambassador Plenipotentiary to the Court of——, I was resolved to give you the preference for the most beautiful girl that ever confidingly placed herself in my hands. I can assure you, my lord," added the wily woman, with a significant look, "that she is as pure and virtuous as the day she was born—an immaculate virgin!"

The old nobleman leered and licked his lips salaciously.

"It is a positive fact, my lord," continued Madame Angelique. "The truth is, she has recently been left an orphan: and to be candid, she is a niece of mine. What can I do with her, poor thing! except provide for her in a way of which her beauty renders her so deserving?"

"To be sure! to be sure!" said the old nobleman, who in order that he might not lose a single syllable that fell from Madame Angelique's lips, drew forth an ear-trumpet, and listened therewith. "Go on——ugh! ugh!"

"It is all precisely as I have the honour to inform your lordship," continued the woman: "and therefore——But what do you think?" she suddenly ejaculated. "Somehow or another the Duke of Marchmont heard of this lovely creature being under my care; and he came last night and offered me five hundred guineas to take her off my hands. But I said, 'No, no, my Lord Duke! I have the honour of a nobleman's acquaintance who I know will cheerfully write me a cheque for a thousand, and bear off Miss Eglantine in triumph!'—That's what I said, my lord."

"And you meant me?" said Lord Wenham, full of nervous anxiety to obtain possession of the much-vaunted prize: "you meant me, my dear creature——ugh! ugh! this cough of mine!——But you meant me?"

"Certainly I did, my lord! And was I not right?"

"To be sure! to be sure!" responded his lordship. "But can you really guarantee—eh!——you know what I mean——ugh! ugh!"

"That she is innocence itself!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "In short, she is almost *too* prudish: but I have no doubt that with your lordship's powers of cajolery—those powers which, as the newspapers say, you used to such effect when you put the Foreign Minister at the Court of —— in such a dilemma——"

"Ah, you have heard of that?" said the ancient diplomatist, chuckling. "Egad! I talked his Excellency off to sleep; and when he woke up, he signed the treaty in the twinkling of an eye. But about this Miss Eglantine——what a sweet name! dear me, what a sweet name!——ugh! ugh! ugh!"

"She is your's therefore, my lord!" answered Madame Angelique; "and the bargain is concluded."

"Eh?—stop!" cried his lordship. "I should just like, you know, to see her first of all—merely, you know——ugh! ugh!—this cough of mine——ugh!"

"To be sure! I will go and fetch her at once. There are writing-materials: your lordship can pen the cheque—for if you are not satisfied with the first view of her, your lordship can but cancel the draught."

Having thus spoken, Madame Angelique issued from the boudoir; and leaving his lordship in the midst of an ecstatic fit of coughing, she ascended to the private chamber of Miss Eglantine, who had only just completed her toilet. For this paragon of virtue and innocence, who was also tinged with prudery, had been passing the night, and several hours of the forenoon also, in the arms of one of the frequenters of Madame Angelique's establishment.

"Now, my dear girl," said the crafty woman, "I am come to announce to you that your fortune is made. I purpose to give up my business as soon as possible: but in all motherly kindness I mean to provide for the dear girls—yourself included—whom I look upon as my daughters. Here is a nobleman immensely rich, who will take you into his keeping: he will allow you at least eighty pounds a week; and if you play your cards well, you can marry him. To be sure, he is not quite so young as he might be—perhaps sixty or so, though he may look a trifle older: but then there is *this* to be considered—that you can manage him all the more easily; for he is somewhat in his dotage. Come along with me at once.

You must look as modest as possible; and when, in his lordship's presence, I hint at the connexion you are about to form with him, you had better shriek out—not too loud, you know, for fear of being overheard——and then you can cling to me; and if you choose to go off in a fit, why, it may perhaps be as well. However, in the long run you will yield your consent; and his lordship will provide for you this very day. Of course you understand, my dear, that I am perfectly disinterested in what I am doing for you: my only object is to give you a comfortable position—and I do not get one farthing by it——no, not a fraction!"

Eglantine was perfectly willing to fall into the infamous woman's views; and she at once followed Madame Angelique to the boudoir. A glance at the writing-desk showed the milliner that the cheque lay there, ready drawn out; and the instant she had introduced Eglantine to the ex-ambassador, she seized the opportunity while his lordship's eyes were riveted gloatingly upon the supposed victim of an aunt's treacherous cupidity, to catch up the draft and thrust it amidst the folds of her dress. The entire scene, as previously arranged, was then gone through: the half-subdued shriek was uttered—the prudery was affected—the appeal to the wicked aunt was made by the innocent and virtuous niece—and then the latter sank gracefully down in a fit, just as an actress swoons or dies upon the stage—though with perhaps a trifle more of voluptuous abandonment of the form. Water was sprinkled upon Eglantine's countenance: she suffered herself to be slowly recovered—she then listened with admirable patience and meekness to Madame Angelique's reasoning—and with an equal degree of exemplary resignation she yielded herself to her destiny.

In the afternoon Lord Wenham came in his carriage to fetch away his paragon of virtue; and he placed her in a sumptuously-furnished house which he hired for her accommodation, with an allowance of eighty pounds per week. We may add that in the evening of the very same day on which his lordship paid Madame Angelique a thousand guineas for the beautiful Eglantine and gave the young lady the first instalment of her magnificent income, he most generously and nobly forwarded a cheque for two guineas to the Secretary of the Society for the Distribution of Bread amongst the Famishing Poor, and a cheque for twenty guineas to the Association for the Protection of Young Females.

To return however, to Madame Angelique. Scarcely had she effected her most disinterested arrangement with Lord Wenham, and had dismissed the paralyzed doting old nobleman,—when the second of the three billets which she had despatched in the morning, was personally answered by the appearance of a gentleman rejoicing in the name of Mr. White Choker. He was dressed in complete black, and wore a low cravat of snowy fairness. He showed no shirt-collar, and had altogether a very clerical look. His hair was cropped all round like a Puritan's, and was combed sleek and straight down over his forehead. He had a long pale countenance, the expression of which was so habitually that of sanctimonious self-martyrization and lugubrious demureness, that even when he tried to smile on entering the milliner's boudoir, he looked like an undertaker or a funeral-mute making a desperate attempt to appear gay. Very keen-sighted persons, on regarding Mr. White Choker more closely, might have fancied that there was something in the expression of his coarse lips and in the gleaming of his dark deep-set small eyes which denoted the strong passions of the man and the difficulty he had in concealing them beneath the gloss of assumed sanctity and hypocritical cant: but on this point we ourselves say nothing—for Mr. White Choker was a saint!

Yes—great indeed was he at Exeter Hall at the period of the May meetings. Who could so well declaim against the ignorance and demoralization of the lower classes? who could whine and moan and weep in such desperate anguish at the benighted condition of the heathen, thousands and thousands of miles off in the islands of the South Pacific? Who could so pathetically enforce the necessity of sending missionaries, and flannel jackets, and hymn-books, and tracts, and all kinds of godly publications, to the poor naked cannibals of those same islands? Who was more ready in putting down his money for the Foreign Bible Society, or in taking up the starving beggar who implored alms of him in a street of the British metropolis? In a word, Mr. White Choker was a veritable saint: his name was considered synonymous with piety and philanthropy themselves; and if it were the fashion in this Protestant country for persons to be canonized—and before they were dead too—Mr. White Choker was the very man whom all the Exeter Hallites would have selected for the honour, and whom the whole Bench of Bishops would have pronounced worthy thereof.

Of course the reader is fully prepared to hear that so good a man could only have come to Madame Angelique's establishment with one object: namely, to read its proprietress a very long and serious lecture on the wickedness of the life she was leading. And yet somehow or another this was *not* the worthy gentleman's aim: for, as we have seen, it was in answer to one of the milliner's billets that he now showed himself in her presence.

"My dear Mr. Choker," she began, with one of her most amiable smiles, "I am sure you will be delighted to learn that I have resolved upon retiring from business and living henceforth respectably upon my means."

"Come now, mother," said the white-cravatted gentleman, with a more successful attempt at a laugh than he had previously made, "this is not Exeter Hall—neither is it a committee of the Foreign Cannibal-Reclaiming, Negro-Christianising and Naked-Savage-Clothing Society. Everything is good in its place and way——"

"And you have come, my dear Mr. Choker," interrupted Madame Angelique, blandly, "for whatsoever I may have good in *my* place and in *my* way to put at your disposal?"

"That is speaking like a true Chris——I mean like a woman of the world," said Mr. Choker, thus very properly correcting himself.

"It is a long, long time, my dear sir," continued the milliner, "since the light of your countenance shone within my humble habitation; and therefore I thought that I might take the liberty, under peculiar circumstances, of inviting you here on the present occasion."

"The truth is," answered Mr. White Choker, "that hypocritical scoundrel Obadiah Snufflenose, the Vice-President of our Society, frequents your house; and as he and I are at daggers-drawn——"

"And yet," exclaimed Madame Angelique, with some degree of astonishment, "I saw the other day a published letter of your's to the gentleman you name, and commencing, 'Dearest and best beloved brother in the good work, Obadiah Snufflenose——'"

"I tell you once more," said Mr. White Choker, with considerable asperity, "that we are not sitting in committee upon the distribution of that last new tract addressed to all savoury vessels. But d—n the vessels! My dear madam, let's get to business. Why did you send for me?"

"If you were to hear, Mr. White Choker," continued Madame Angelique, "that I have the loveliest German girl beneath this roof, who has only gone astray once—*once*, upon my honour, and no more——"

"Ah, if I thought I could rely upon you," said Mr. Choker, whose curiosity, as well as a stronger passion, was considerably piqued. "But it was not altogether on account of Snufflenose that I have staid away from your establishment for the last three or four years: it was because that young creature—you remember her well—that you furnished me, with the solemn assurance she was chastity herself, presented me with—a—a—thumping boy four of five months afterwards, and threatened to expose me if I did not provide for the brat. Ah, madam, that was a sad, sad affair——"

"But, my dear friend Mr. Choker," interrupted Madame Angelique, "we are all liable to error——"

"But such an error as that, my dear madam! Only conceive a thumping boy!"—and the white-cravatted gentleman's countenance became so elongated at the bare thought, that at the moment it could have vied with the length of her bright poker itself.

"Well, my dear sir, I admit the thumping boy was a great nuisance—a very great nuisance. But in this case, with my beautiful charming Linda, who has only fallen once, there cannot possibly be any such apprehension. If you were just to see her——But what do you think?" ejaculated the milliner, thus suddenly interrupting herself. "Old Lord Wenham was here just now, and he actually and positively drew me out a cheque for four hundred guineas for this sweet German. And what did I say? 'No, no, my lord; I have the honour of being acquainted with a gentleman who will give five hundred!' That's what I said, Mr. Choker!"

"But you mentioned no name?" said the saint, anxiously.

"Not for the world!" responded Madame Angelique. "And this dear Linda, who is discretion itself,—she will never betray you: but she will go to Exeter Hall when you are to speak—and she will wave the white handkerchief—she will weep too at your most pathetic passages——in fact, she will set an entire bench-full of the audience whimpering and sobbing."

"Oh, bother take Exeter Hall at this present moment!" cried the saint; and his interjection was accompanied by a most unsaint-like oath. "You want five hundred guineas for this Linda? Hum! ha! But is she so very beautiful? is she well formed—stout—luxurious——"

"A superb bust, my dear Mr. Choker. But come! here are writing-materials—draw up the cheque—and I will go and fetch the charming Linda, so that you may arrive at a speedy decision."

With these words, Madame Angelique quitted the boudoir; and ascended to the chamber of the German girl,—who having, like Miss Eglantine, recently dismissed an admirer who regularly visited her twice a week, was finishing her toilet by the aid of a female dependant. The maid was dismissed from the room; and Madame Angelique, having intimated her intention of retiring into private life, proceed to address the young lady in the following manner:—

"It is therefore my duty as well as my pleasure, dear Linda, to provide for yourself and companions. You know what I have just done for Eglantine; and now it is your turn. A very pious gentleman will take you into his keeping: he will pension you handsomely; and when your child is born—which I suppose will be in about five months—he *must* provide for it liberally, because you will have him completely in your power. He has got a wife and large family; and if you only threaten to go to his house and create a disturbance, you might bring him to any terms. He is immensely rich, and as thorough-paced a hypocrite as ever the sun shone upon. Of course, my dear girl, you will keep your condition a secret as long as you can; and between you and me, I have assured him that you are but one remove from complete chastity——However, you will know how to manage your white-cravatted puritan; and now come and be introduced to him. Stop!—you can throw a kerchief over your neck, so as to appear modest; and you can easily suffer it to glide off, as if quite unconsciously, in the bashful confusion of your thoughts."

Linda was well pleased with the arrangements thus sketched forth; and the kerchief being duly thrown over her neck, she accompanied Madame Angelique to the boudoir, where Mr. White Choker had in the meantime penned the cheque for five hundred guineas. Linda appeared all blushing modesty; and her looks were bent down, as the saint devoured her with his gloating eyes. There was a little conversation, during which the kerchief glided off from the syren's white neck and voluptuous bosom; and her triumph was complete.

In the evening Mr. White Choker came in a street-cab to fetch away his charmer; and though he dared not use his own private carriage for the purpose, he nevertheless promised that on the following day Linda should have the most beautiful turn-out of her own that was to be seen in all London. He installed her in a beautiful little suburban villa, ready furnished, and which he had hired off-hand for her immediate accommodation: then, as an excuse for passing that first night away from home, he assured the wife of his bosom, the excellent Mrs. White Choker, that he was going to keep a vigil of blessed prayer by the bedside of a dear brother in the good work, who was lying at that extremity which was but the passport to the realm of eternal bliss.

Scarcely had Madame Angelique completed her transaction with Mr. White Choker, when the Hon. Augustus Softly was announced. This young gentleman had just entered his twenty-first year, and would inherit on attaining his majority a fortune of sixty thousand poands, if he had not already anticipated it by bills and bonds to the tune of nearly one-half. He had recently obtained a commission in the Guards; and on being emancipated from the apron strings of his fashionable mamma, he had resolved to see a little of "life." It was however chiefly at night-time that he took his survey of what he termed "life:" for inasmuch as he was never in bed until three or four o'clock in the morning, he slept till it was time to turn out for parade—after which he drank so copiously of bottled stout and cherry-brandy at lunch, "just to give a tone to his stomach," that he was usually constrained to go to bed again in order to sleep off the effects of so much liquor and rise refreshed for dinner-time. Then his stomach required a new "tone;" and if a couple of bottles of champagne, with other vinous fluids, were capable of affording such tone, the Hon. Augustus Softly certainly adopted the panacea for procuring it. Turning out "to see life" at ten o'clock at night, he had the advantage of the gas-lamps to show him how to break policemen's heads; or else he dropped into some fashionable gambling house, where there was light sufficient for the black-legs and sharpers there to pillage him most unmercifully, though apparently not light enough to show the young gentleman himself that he was thus fleeced.

In personal appearance the Hon. Augustus Softly was short and thin — totally beardless, though he adopted every known method of inducing a moustache to make its appearance against its own inclination; and his air was altogether so boyish that he did not look above seventeen. He had tolerably regular features, of an aristocratic cast; but the expression of his countenance was insipid and vacant, even to stolidity. Frivolous-minded and shallow-pated, with all the follies of a boy, he rather aped than was endowed with the manners of a man. His idea of "life" seemed to consist in hurrying himself on to rack and ruin as fast as ever he could—raising money at exorbitant interest—plunging into debt—lavishing his gold upon pretended friends, who flattered him to his face and laughed at him behind his back—playing the spendthrift amongst the dissolute and the depraved—thinking it one of the finest things to drop a few hundreds at the gaming-table, and the finest thing of all to let my Lord Swindlehurst palm off on him for five hundred guineas a horse that would be dear at fifty. Such was Lieutenant Softly's idea of "life;" and this was the young gentleman who, having received Madame Angelique's third billet, now came to answer it in person.

We must observe that the Hon. Augustus Softly had only visited the milliner's establishment on two former occasions; and each of those times Mademoiselle Armantine, the French girl, was absent for some reason or another. This Madame Angelique knew full well: she was consequently aware that the young gentleman had never as yet seen her—and hence the game which she was about to play.

"Well, old lady," he said, on entering the boudoir—for he thought it mighty fine to adopt a familiar manner with Madame Angelique; and we should incidentally remark that he spoke with the languid dissipated air and with the drawing-room drawl which are best approved amongst silly young men in fashionable life—"well, old lady, what on earth could have made you send to drag me out of my comfortable bed at such an unseemly hour in the morning?"

"Yes, it is unseemly," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "I admit it. Only four in the afternoon —in the morning, I mean! But then you see, you fashionable young gentlemen turn night into day, and day into night——Oh! it is positively shocking, you naughty fellows!"

"Why, there's really nothing going on in the day-time," said Mr. Softly, with an air of satiety and disgust. "I am sick of bowing to the same beauties in the Park—sick of lounging up Regent Street; and as for morning-calls—why, we of the Guards, you know, never pay them!"

"Ah! I repeat, you gentlemen of the Guards are such terrible fellows!" said Madame Angelique, with a deprecating look: "you are enough to turn the heads of all the sweet creatures—ravish their hearts——"

"Well, I flatter myself," drawled out Mr. Softly, leaning affectedly back in his chair and caressing his beardless chin with an air of languid listlessness, "we of the Guards are rather overpowering in our way."

"You may well say that, my dear Mr. Softly: for if you only knew why I took the liberty of asking you to favour me with a call this afternoon——morning, I mean——"

"Some precious wickedness, I'll be bound!"—and Mr. Softly condescended to give forth a slight laugh, which corresponded amazingly well with his drawing-room drawl.

"Wickedness indeed, you naughty good-for-nothing fellow!" responded the wily woman, shaking her finger at her intended victim. "Here is the sweetest, loveliest, young French girl, who has only been in keeping with the Duke of Marchmont for two months, at the rate of a hundred guineas a week—and who has left him—positively and actually left his Grace, all through you!"

"Through me, old lady?" said Augustus, running his fingers through his limp light hair, which hung in what are called rat's tails over his ears. "What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean that she went to see the Guards parade the other day; and she came running off to me—for I am her milliner, you must know—to ask if I could tell her who was that duck of a young officer? And then she described you!"

"How delicious!—positively delicious!" said Mr. Softly, chuckling and rubbing his hands.

"I knew whom she meant in a moment," continued Madame Angelique; "because when she said that she alluded to the handsomest, the genteelest, and yet the most military-looking of all the young officers, I was perfectly well aware whom she was speaking of: and when I told her that I had the honour of your acquaintance, she nearly fainted with joy—and she vowed that she could be happier with you on fifty guineas a week, than with his Grace of Marchmont on two hundred."

"Why this is as good as a romance!" exclaimed the delighted and credulous Augustus.

"Quite as good," answered Madame Angelique: and she no doubt thought precisely what she said. "Only conceive, my dear Softly, the honour, the fame, and the glory of running off with a Duke's mistress! Why, it is better than running off with his wife: because a man of the world is always more sensitive in respect to his mistress than he is to his wife. How you will be spoken about!—what a noise you will make!—what a sensation!——and all the ladies will smilingly call you the naughty man!"

"'Pon my soul, it will be quite delicious!" exclaimed Lieutenant Softly. "But is she beautiful?"

"Beautiful, elegant, and accomplished," rejoined Madame Angelique. "She is the daughter of an old French Marquis; and Marchmont took her, by my aid, from a convent between two and three months ago. She never really liked the Duke: her only object was to escape from a seclusion which she abhorred; and as for her virtue, apart from this one little failing, I am ready to guarantee it in a bond of a hundred thousand pounds, or on an affadavit sworn before the Lord Mayor of London."

Of course such guarantees clinched the argument—at least in the mind of the credulous, conceited, and frivolous Augustus Softly; and already as elate as he could be with his presumed conquest, he gave vent to his delight in the most extravagant expressions—all of which Madame Angelique carefully echoed, while laughing in her sleeve.

"Feeling confident," she resumed, "that you would grant the dear girl an interview, I sent to request that she would pay me a visit this afternoon. But would you believe it? she is so frenzied with delight, that she orders her maid to pack up, bag and baggage—and away she comes, leaving the splendid apartments the Duke had provided for her—and upon her toilette-table a rose-tinted perfumed billet, with a few laconic lines to the effect that she separates from his Grace for ever! I told her that her conduct was madness, as she could not possibly be sure that you would take her under your own protection——though it is true that old Lord Wenham, who was here just now, and saw her alight at my door, offered me two hundred and fifty guineas if I would use my influence——"

"By Jove, I will just make it double!" ejaculated Softly. "I hope you will not feel offended——"

"I really do not know," said Madame Angelique, with a very serious countenance, "whether I ought to receive anything in a transaction which is really so delicate, and which I merely undertook to manage from motives of pity for the sweet creature and out of regard for you. But if you *must* write a cheque for five hundred guineas, I cannot think of wounding your feelings by refusing to accept it."

"How lucky I got that loan through Armytage this morning!" thought the young lieutenant to himself, as, putting aside all his fashionable languor, he flew to the desk to pen the cheque: "or else I should have cut but a devilish sorry figure with the old lady—and should have lost the French beauty."

"Dear me, what creatures you young Guardsmen are!" said Madame Angelique, as if musing to herself, but taking very good care that the Hon. Augustus Softly should catch the words which she uttered. "I never saw such killing men—their very looks are sufficient to conquer female hearts in a moment!"

"Where is the beauty?" asked Softly, drinking in all this pleasant flattery.

"I will go and fetch her," said Madame Angelique: and she issued from the boudoir.

Mademoiselle Armantine had passed the preceding night in the arms of an *attaché* to a Foreign Embassy:—not a German one, for Madame Angelique knowing very well that the German representatives of their native princes, were a set of scurvy paupers, never allowed them to set foot in her establishment. The French girl was in an elegant evening toilet; and she looked ravishingly beautiful. Madame Angelique complimented her upon her bewitching appearance; and then addressed her in the ensuing manner:—

"You are already aware, my dear Armantine, that I am about to give up my business, and that I have already provided in the handsomest manner for those dear girls Eglantine and Linda. Your turn is now come; and between you and me, my dear, you are the best off. What think you of a young, handsome, and elegant officer of the Guards—exceedingly intelligent and accomplished—witty and clever—not yet of age, but able to raise as much money as he thinks fit?"

Armantine's countenance expressed her satisfaction with the proposed arrangement.

"I am glad that you are pleased," continued Madame Angelique; "and it is all the more delightful to me, inasmuch as the trouble I am taking is purely disinterested. But there are one or two little things that I must tell you, my dear young friend."

She then explained the particulars of the tale which she had told the Hon. Augustus Softly,—adding, "You can safely give him the same assurances: for I will take care that Marchmont shall not contradict you. I can do anything I like with the Duke; and as for that part of the history which flattered the young officer with the idea of the violent passion you have conceived for him——"

"Trust to me to play my part properly," interjected Armantine. "Of all men as a protector, I could best fancy an officer in the Guards!"

"He will allow you fifty guineas a week," rejoined Madame Angelique; "and if within a twelvemonth you do not ruin him completely, it will be your own fault. My dear girl, the reputation of a young lady is never established until she has ruined three or four of her lovers. Look at your celebrated actresses——But no matter! Softly must be dying of impatience; and you must accompany me forthwith. Remember, my dear, bashful tenderness and modest joy—that is your cue!"

The infamous woman thereupon conducted the pliant and willing French girl to the boudoir, and so well did Armantine play her part that the Hon. Augustus Softly was completely ravished by his

presumed conquest. Madame Angelique took possession of the cheque unperceived by Armantine,—who that same evening left the establishment, to take up her new abode in the splendidly furnished lodgings which her lover had lost no time in engaging for her reception.

CHAPTER LXXXIX.

AMY.

The village of Headcorn is at no great distance from the town of Ashford in the county of Kent. About a quarter of a mile from Headcorn stood a neat little cottage in the midst of a garden; and the place was the property of an elderly woman—the widow of a small farmer who had held land in that neighbourhood. It was, in this cottage that Amy Sutton, formerly lady's-maid to the Duchess of Marchmont, was now lodging.

Some weeks had elapsed since her meeting with Christian Ashton in the train on her journey to Headcorn; and the reason which had induced the unfortunate young woman to seek this retirement, could no longer be concealed from the eyes of the world. She was in a way to become a mother.

It was in the afternoon; and Amy was seated alone in the little parlour which she occupied at the cottage. There was a work-basket on the table—but she did not work: there were books on a shelf—but she had recourse to none of them to beguile the time. She was plunged in deep thought; and the expression of her countenance would have shown to an observer, if any at the time were near, that the tenour of her reflections was of a dark ominously brooding character. She had informed Christian of the exact truth in respect to the black treachery which Marchmont had perpetrated towards her; and she was resolved on vengeance. Amy was naturally one of those dispositions that, coldly implacable when once a determination of this sort was settled, exhibited no feverish impatience to carry it out until opportunity served. She would bide her time—and therefore her's was a character all the more dangerous, and the revenge she contemplated was all the more certain to be sooner or later wreaked.

But it was not the sense of her wrongs which solely engaged her thoughts: she had to deplore the fall of a sister more beauteous than even she herself was, and whom she had loved as tenderly as her cold disposition would permit her to love at all. She had in the morning of that day received a letter from her sister; and the contents thereof entertwined themselves with the reflections that she was pursuing in regard to her own position.

The farmer's widow was no relation to Amy Sutton: but they had become acquainted by some means which it is not worth while pausing to describe; and when Amy had found that the time was approaching when she could no longer be able to conceal her position from the world, she bethought herself of Mrs. Willis as a woman in whom she could confide, and of her rural habitation as a place where she might bring forth in seclusion the offspring of her shame and dishonour. For in such a light does society regard the illegitimately born; although the mother may have been guiltless of wanton frailty, and merely the victim of foulest treachery—as was the case with poor Amy Sutton.

It was in the afternoon, as we have said, that she was sitting in the little parlour at the cottage when her ear caught the sound of footsteps approaching through the garden; and raising her eyes, she beheld Christian Ashton. Her first impulse was to order the servant-girl to deny her to the young gentleman: for be it recollected that when they were travelling together, she had not revealed to him the full extent of the misery entailed upon her by the Duke of Marchmont's black criminality. But a second thought determined her to see him. He was already acquainted with nearly every thing that regarded her;—and of what avail to keep back the rest? Besides, in her solitude she could welcome him as an old acquaintance—almost as a friend: she knew him to be a youth of the strictest probity and honour; and there is no sorrow so desperate but that it may derive a balm, however slight and however evanescent in its effect, from friendly companionship.

Christian was accordingly introduced; and with that air of frank kindness which was natural to him, he proffered his hand,—saying, "I would not pass by this neighbourhood, Amy, without seeing you—although my time is not completely my own."

The unfortunate young woman had instinctively risen on the entrance of one whom she regarded as a superior; and then her condition was at once revealed to his view. His sense of delicacy as well as his generosity however prevented him from betraying that he noticed the circumstance; and in the same considerate mood he at once glided into discourse upon the current topics of the day. He was almost sorry that he had intruded upon the young woman's privacy, painfully situated as she was: but he had presented himself there with a kind motive—for the tale she had told him in the railway carriage had enlisted his sympathy on her behalf.

"You can no longer be ignorant, Mr. Ashton," Amy at length said, while her countenance was suffused with the glow of mingled shame and indignation, "of the reason which led me into this seclusion. I am unhappy—so unhappy, Mr. Ashton, that were it not for the sake of revenge I should not cling to life. But, Oh, revenge will be so sweet!—and deadly indeed shall its nature be when the proper time for wreaking it arrives!"

"Great though your wrongs have been, Amy," said Christian, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "think you that you do well thus to keep your mind in a state of incessant excitement by brooding over this hoped-for vengeance?"

"It has become to me the sustaining food of existence," answered the unfortunate young woman; "and if I perish on the scaffold I will have the life of that man! Unless indeed it be possible to wreak some vengeance which he may live to feel——"

"For heaven's sake, Amy, speak not in this dreadful manner!" exclaimed Christian. "To talk of taking the life of the Duke of Marchmont, displays a frightful recklessness in respect to your own life."

"And what have I to live for?" demanded the young woman, with even a fierce sternness. "Not for the child that will be the offspring of mingled outrage and shame! No," she added bitterly: "I loathe and abhor it even before it is born!"

"You will think differently," said our young hero, "when the babe nestles in your bosom."

"As soon place a viper there!" ejaculated Amy Sutton. "But I was about to tell you that I *have* nothing, and *can* have nothing—save my present hope of vengeance—which binds me to life. When that is accomplished, I shall be ready to die—or in the accomplishment of it I may engulf myself!"

"But have you no relatives," asked Christian, infinitely pained as well as shocked by the language that flowed from the lips of the unfortunate young woman,—"have you no relatives who could be kind to you now, and who would have to deplore your fate if by your own madness——"

"I have one relative whom I loved—yes, still love," responded Amy, in a mournful tone,—"a very near one—a sister: but she is likewise fallen!"

"By treachery also?" asked Christian.

"No—by her own wantonness and weakness," rejoined Amy. "I will tell you a brief narrative. We two sisters were left orphans at a somewhat early age: an aunt took charge of Marion—another aunt took charge of me. The aunt who adopted Marion was the richer of the two relatives; and she gave Marion an education fitting her for the position of a lady. The aunt who took charge of me, brought me up to a genteel servitude—namely, the position of a lady's-maid. This aunt died when I was between fifteen and sixteen: I went into service—and have ever since earned my bread by mine own honest industry. My aunt taught me thrift—and I have been thrifty: or else I should not now possess the means of retiring awhile from the world—for not one single coin of the gold that the villain Marcmont offered as a recompense for his foul treachery, did I accept! But I was about to speak of Marion. It would be difficult to conceive a more lovely creature: she is indeed exquisitely beautiful—and her beauty has proved her ruin. Two years ago the aunt who had adopted her, died suddenly; and the property which she intended Marion to inherit, was swept away into the possession of strangers, through some informality in the will of the deceased. I recommended Marion to obtain a situation as a governess—for which her accomplishments fitted her. She went into a family in that capacity; but in a short time she became the victim of a seducer. This was the Earl of Beltinge; and with him she lived until very recently. I thought all the while—or at least until some weeks back—that she was still in her position as a governess: for her letters gave me an assurance to that effect. On leaving the service of the Duchess of Marchmont, I went to see my sister: but instead of finding her living as a preceptress in a respectable family, I found her luxuriating in the gilded infamy which at once proclaimed itself to my comprehension. Then, in the agony of my mind, I revealed everything which related to myself—told her how I had likewise fallen, though heaven knows through no fault of mine!—and told her likewise who was the author of my ruin. Then I came hither."

Amy ceased suddenly; and Christian, much pained by the narrative which he had just heard, said in a gentle voice, "I fear from the manner in which you broke off, that you have nothing to add in respect to penitence and reformation on the part of your erring sister?"

"Alas, nothing!" responded Amy Sutton. "So far from seeking to turn into a better path, Marion has taken a downward step in the career which she is pursuing. The Earl of Beltinge discovered that she was faithless to him; and in a moment he discarded her. Yes—mercilessly, though perhaps his severity was justifiable enough, he turned her adrift into the streets,—stripping her of every valuable and costly gem with which he had presented her during the time she was under his protection. What resource had she? The unfortunate girl found her way to a house of fashionable infamy, which is not altogether—at least in one sense—unknown to you."

"To me?" ejaculated Christian, in the most unfeigned astonishment: and then with a look of indignation, he said, "I can assure you, Miss Sutton——"

"I did not mean to offend nor to insult you," responded the young woman. "The fashionable house of infamy to which I allude, is that same Madame Angelique's——"

"Ah, I comprehend!" cried Christian,—"the place where those dresses were made, the diabolical use of which so nearly proved fatal to the character of the Duchess of Marchmont!"

"The same," Amy replied: "for the avocation of a dressmaker has been for years carried on by Madame Angelique, as a blind for the loathsome traffic which she pursues behind the scenes."

"And yet the Duchess herself patronized her at one time," observed our hero.

"Yes—but in total ignorance of the real character of that house," rejoined Amy; "and in the same manner Madame Angelique has had many lady customers who knew not the vile nature of the woman whom they thus patronized. But as I was telling you, Marion betook herself to that abode of fashionable infamy,—where she dwelt for a short time. There she occasionally met Marchmont; and he, little suspecting that she was my sister, made overtures, which of course she invariably rejected. She left that house the day before yesterday. I have received a letter from her this morning: she tells me that she is now under the protection of a man whose name was at once familiar to me, and will be familiar enough to you. I mean Wilson Stanhope."

"The villain!" ejaculated Christian. "I have more reasons than one for loathing and abhorring that unprincipled man! He grossly insulted my sister—he lent himself, as you are aware, to the iniquitous designs of the Duke of Marchmont—and he insulted one likewise," added our hero, thinking of his well-beloved Isabella, "who is as dear to me as that affectionate and cherished sister to whom I have just alluded."

"Yes: Marion," continued Amy, "is now under the protection of that man; and singular enough is it that through the Duke of Marchmont's agency this change in her circumstances has been brought about. I am as yet unacquainted with all the particulars: Marion had not time to describe them yesterday—she will write to me again to-day—and to-morrow I shall know all."

"But is it possible," exclaimed Christian, shocked at the impression which Amy's statement had just left upon his mind, "that your sister can accept boons at the hands of him who has done such foul wrong unto yourself?"

Amy Sutton did not immediately answer our hero's question: but she looked at him hard in the face with a peculiar expression—and then said, "The unfortunate Marion is not so deeply depraved, nor so lost to every good feeling, that she is indifferent enough to her sister's wrongs as to accept favours from the author of them. No, Mr. Ashton! She will succour me in the pursuance of my revenge, if opportunity may serve; and from something which she hints in her letter, there is a chance that her services may prove thus available. But, Oh! if Marion could but be reclaimed——it is this that dwells in my mind! And now, after all I have told you of the degradation of my sister, and with your knowledge of my own shame and dishonour, I ask what have I worth living for—unless it be for revenge—and wherefore should I continue to cling to life when once that revenge is accomplished?"

Christian endeavoured to reason with the young woman in a proper manner: but she was deaf to all his remonstrances—her mind was evidently settled upon the wreaking a deadly vengeance of some sort against the Duke of Marchmont; and our hero saw with pain and sorrow that no friendly argument could divert her from her course. He therefore at length rose to depart.

"I have not as yet explained," he said, "the precise motive of my visit; and from something which you yourself let drop, it may be unnecessary to make the offer which I had originally intended. Judging from all you told me in the railway-carriage some weeks back, I fancied that you purposed to retire into some seclusion here and not knowing how you might be situated in a financial point of view——"

"A thousand thanks, Mr. Ashton," responded Amy,—"but I have sufficient for all my purposes. Though declining this generous offer, I am not the less sensible of your well-meant kindness—and I shall be for ever grateful."

Christian took his departure; and returning to the station, he proceeded by the next train to London. On his arrival in the British metropolis, he repaired straight to Mrs. Macaulay's house in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square; and Mrs. Macaulay in person opened the front door to receive him.

"Well, my dear Mr. Ashton, it is quite an age since I saw you!" exclaimed the lodging-house-keeper, with her blandest smiles and most amiable looks. "Where have you been for the last two months? But, dear me! how you are improving—and what a fine handsome young man you are growing! A lady of my age may pay you such a compliment, you know. But pray walk in. Your room is all ready for your reception. I have got rid of that odious old couple who used to lock up their tea-caddy and decant their wine for themselves. Would you believe it, Mr. Ashton?—they went away without so much as giving the maid a single shilling for herself; and they took off with them the leg and wing of a fowl which they had for the previous day's dinner!"

"My room is ready for me, you say?" exclaimed Christian in astonishment.

"Yes—to be sure!" responded Mrs. Macaulay. "Did not Mr. Redcliffe tell you in his letter——"

"He merely told me that immediately on my arrival in London I was to come to him, and that I need not take up my abode previously at any tavern or lodging-house."

"To be sure not!" ejaculated Mrs. Macaulay. "And where was your shrewdness, my dear Mr. Ashton, when you failed to comprehend that Mr. Redcliffe meant you to take up your abode here? All is settled and arranged; and it was on your account I got rid of those odious Johnsons, with their meanness and stinginess! Ah, you have brought all your luggage with you? That's right! But, dear me! don't think of paying the cabman till he has carried it up-stairs for you——And mind, my man," she added, addressing herself to the individual in question, "that you don't knock the paper off the walls with the corner of that great box. Now do walk in, Mr. Ashton."

"But where is Mr. Redcliffe?" inquired our hero.

"He will be in presently to dinner—at six o'clock as usual. It is only half-past five—and you have therefore plenty of time for a little chat with me. By the bye, I and that odious Mrs. Sifkin are as much at daggers-drawn as ever, although I gave that magnificent party in token of our reconciliation. But she behaved infamously! She went and told Mrs. Wanklin, who told Mrs. Chowley which keeps the baby-linen warehouse in the Tottenham Court Road, that I should say that Mr. Hogben had told me that both the Miss Chowleys were setting their caps at Captain Bluff. But here is Mr. Redcliffe, I declare!—a good twenty minutes before his time!"

Christian was not at all sorry that Mrs. Macaulay's garrulity should be cut short by the appearance of his friend,—at whose hands he received a most cordial welcome. Mrs. Macaulay was very anxious to have the paying of the cabman, with whom she would no doubt have got up a pleasant little dispute as to the amount of his fare: but Christian cut the matter short by slipping into the man's hand a gratuity so liberal that it made him touch his hat to the donor, and then bestow a look of insolent triumph on Mrs. Macaulay.

Christian accompanied Mr. Redcliffe to this gentleman's sitting-room,—where dinner was speedily served up. Mr. Redcliffe conversed on general topics during the repast; and as he was evidently postponing his explanation of the reasons which had induced him to send for Christian to London, our hero did not think it proper to put any question on the point. One or two little circumstances however struck him. From the very first moment of their acquaintance Mr. Redcliffe's manner had been invariably friendly: but now it was most kind and even affectionate. He moreover contemplated Christian frequently and fixedly; and after those earnest surveys he would sink into a profound reverie. All this our young hero could not possibly fail to notice; and he therefore awaited the coming explanations with all the more eager curiosity.

The repast was cleared away—the dessert and wine were placed upon the table—and Mr. Redcliffe then questioned Christian as to all that he had been recently doing. There was something in that gentleman's manner which invited the fullest confidence; and our hero accordingly revealed to Mr. Redcliffe his love for Isabella Vincent. He related everything which had occurred at Ramsgate; and having brought down the narrative to the point at which it is already known to the reader, he concluded in the following manner:—

"Yesterday morning's post brought Miss Vincent a letter, containing the startling announcement that her cousin the Earl of Lascelles, and her aunt the Countess, had ceased to exist: so that all in a moment Isabella found herself the heiress of fine estates and immense wealth. When she had recovered from the shock which the intelligence of that fatal accident or double suicide—whichever it was—naturally caused her to experience, the amiable and faithful girl gave me to understand that if the sudden possession of wealth were a source of satisfaction, it was because it would in due time enable her to prove the sincerity of that love which she entertains for me."

"My dear boy," exclaimed Mr. Redcliffe, with a degree of excitement which was very unusual on his part, "I am rejoiced to learn that you have found one who is so eminently deserving of your own devoted love, and who experiences so true a sentiment in return. But continue. What else have you to tell me?"

"The bridal of Sir Edgar Beverley and his beautiful Laura was celebrated yesterday," continued our hero; "and soon after the ceremony they set off for London, where they purpose to pass the honeymoon. Isabella accompanied them. She could not journey alone; and, as a matter of course, it was not discreet for me to travel with her. She has gone to that mansion which she originally entered a few months back in a state of dependence upon her uncle——she has gone to it as its mistress!"

"Such is the mutability of human affairs," observed Mr. Redcliffe solemnly. "But proceed, my dear Christian."

"It was originally arranged," continued our young hero, "that I should remain at Verner House until this morning; and therefore, even if this morning's post had not brought me your kind letter, I should have returned to the metropolis today. Rest assured, my dear sir, that I was most anxious to obey your summons with all possible despatch: but still I could not help halting for an hour by the way, to visit an unfortunate creature——a victim of the Duke of Marchmont's!"

"Ah!" ejaculated Redcliffe; "when will this man's crimes cease to display themselves to me at every step? when will his career of iniquity be ended?"

"Never, I fear," responded Christian, "until his existence itself ceases."

Our hero then, at Mr. Redcliffe's request, narrated everything he had heard from the lips of the unfortunate young woman—not even omitting the painful episode in respect to her sister Marion. Mr. Redcliffe listened with the deepest attention; and when the youth's narrative was brought to a termination, Mr. Redcliffe addressed him in the following manner:—

"My dear Christian, from everything that you have told me, I deduce evidences of your right principles, the generosity of your disposition, and the intrinsic excellence of your character. At the very first I experienced such an interest in your behalf—indeed such an attachment towards yourself and your sister, that I should have at once proposed to place you in a condition of independence: but I felt how much better it was to leave you to eat the bread of industry for a time. I have kept my eye upon you; and I have also been aware that your sister was most comfortably situated under the friendly care of the Princess of Inderabad. The period has now arrived when you must no longer be left to shift for yourself in the world. I am a lone man, Christian—this you already know——you may think too that my habits are peculiar, my manners eccentric—and if for a single moment you doubt whether you can be happy beneath the same roof with myself, you shall be provided for elsewhere—until such time when——"

Mr. Redcliffe hesitated for a few instants; and the expression of some strong emotion passed over his countenance. He then added, "Until such time that your beautiful Isabella's period of mourning shall be ended and you may accompany her to the altar."

Again Mr. Redcliffe paused: he rose from his seat—paced twice to and fro in the apartment—and returning to his chair, said, "Think not, my dear Christian, that when the day of your marriage arrives, you will lead Miss Vincent to the altar as a dependant on her own fortune. No!—you shall have wealth, Christian—rest assured that you shall have wealth—and at least as an equal shall you lead her to that altar. Perhaps—perhaps——"

But Mr. Redcliffe stopped short; and our young hero, throwing himself at the feet of his benefactor, took his hand and pressed it to his lips. Mr. Redcliffe, who was profoundly affected, smoothed down the curling masses of Christian's raven hair,—at the same time murmuring, "My dear boy, there is nothing that I will not do for yourself and your sister!"

Christian hastened to assure his benefactor that so far from desiring to separate from him, or to live elsewhere, it would give him the utmost pleasure to dwell beneath the same roof.

"So be it, for the present," answered Mr. Redcliffe. "As for Christina, let her remain where she is: it is impossible that she can be in better companionship, or with a kinder friend. I have long known the Princess Indora——But enough, Christian! Let your sister continue to dwell with her Highness—until——"

And again Mr. Redcliffe stopped short, as if every instant he were afraid that in the excitement of his feelings he should be betrayed into the utterance of something more than he might choose to reveal. But our young hero was himself too full of varied emotions to perceive, much less to suspect the precise nature of those that were agitating his benefactor; and again was his heartfelt gratitude poured forth to Mr. Redcliffe.

This gentleman now said to our hero, "Tell me, Christian, everything connected with your earlier years: reveal to me in fullest detail all that regards yourself and your sister, from your most infantile recollections down to the period when I first became acquainted with you in London. Do not think it is mere idle curiosity on my part: but I feel so deep an interest in your amiable sister and yourself, that everything which in any way concerns you is of importance in my estimation."

Christian proceeded to comply with his benefactor's request: his narrative was however concise enough, and was speedily told.

"To-morrow," said Mr. Redcliffe, "immediately after breakfast you shall go and fetch your sister to pass the day with us. I will give you a note for the Princess Indora, so that her assent shall at once be conceded. Ah! and request your sister, my dear Christian, to bring with her those little relics to which you have just alluded in your narrative: for, as I have said, everything that regards you has an interest in my eyes——and—and I have a curiosity to see those cherished objects which belonged to your deceased mother, and which your uncle Mr. Ashton placed in your hands when you were both old enough to receive possession of them and to appreciate it."

We need not further extend the description of this touching and pathetically exciting scene which took place between Mr. Redcliffe and our hero. Suffice it to say that the remainder of the evening was passed in most friendly conversation on the part of the benefactor and the recipient of his bounties; so that when Christian retired to his couch, he had every reason to felicitate himself upon this evening as being one of the happiest and most fortunate in his somewhat chequered existence.

Immediately after breakfast in the morning, Christian repaired to the villa of the Princess Indora; and on arriving there, he was most fervently embraced by his loving and delighted sister. From the Princess he experienced a most cordial welcome; and such was the state of his own feelings, with all his present prospects of happiness, that he did not perceive how for a moment

Indora trembled, and how the colour went and came on her magnificent countenance, as he presented to her Clement Redcliffe's letter. She retired to another apartment to peruse it; and the twins were left alone together. Then Christian informed his sister of everything that had taken place between himself and Mr. Redcliffe on the preceding evening; and our amiable young heroine was infinitely rejoiced to hear that her beloved brother need no longer consider himself dependent on the precarious chances of employment for the means of subsistence.

By the time Christian's explanations were finished, the Princess of Inderabad returned to the room where she had left them together; and her Highness at once intimated to Christina that it was with infinite pleasure she granted the request conveyed in Mr. Redcliffe's note. But if the twins had been more accustomed to penetrate into the human heart—if they had more curiosity in studying the looks of individuals — they might have suspected that there was more in Mr. Red-Redcliffe's billet than a mere request that Christina might be spared for the day; they would have fancied there was something which was of peculiar interest and importance to the Indian lady likewise.

While on their way in a hired vehicle from Bayswater to Mortimer Street, the twins had leisure for additional explanations. Christian made his delighted sister acquainted with the change that had taken place in respect to Isabella Vincent—how she had become possessed of an immense fortune—and how in her altered position she had renewed the assurances of love and constancy towards our hero. And then Christina recited, in fuller details than she had written to her brother when he was at Ramsgate, the particulars of the outrage she had undergone when she was forcibly carried off from the villa, and when she was rescued by Lord Octavian Meredith. The artless girl concealed nothing: she explained to her brother all that had occurred between herself and the young nobleman; and while Christian expressed his approval of the course she had adopted, he could not help saying to her in a low, tender, compassionating voice, "I am afraid, my sweet sister, that your affections are indeed more or less centred in Lord Octavian?"

"Christian," replied the weeping, blushing girl, "I have striven—heaven alone can tell how I have striven—to banish that image from my mind; and I have not been able! I have prayed to God to succour and uphold me in my task: but my very prayers have seemed to impress that image all the more forcibly on the memory of your unhappy sister. I should deem myself very guilty, were it not that I know that we poor weak mortals have no power over volition—and all that we can do is to prevent such circumstances as these from leading us into error."

"Error, my dearest sister!" exclaimed Christian: "mention not that word in connexion with your own pure and virtuous self!"

Christina pressed her brother's hand in token of gratitude for the confidence he thus reposed in her, and of which she knew herself to be so completely worthy; and then she said in a tremulous, hesitating voice, "Must I to Mr. Redcliffe make all these revelations?"

Christian did not immediately answer: he reflected profoundly. At length he said, "No, my sweet sister—these are matters too sacred to be discussed save and except with a very near and dear relative. Mr. Redcliffe is my benefactor,—and nothing more. I love him—we must both love him: and if he should demand your fullest confidence in all and every respect, even to your most secret thoughts — *then* must you speak frankly. But not of your own accord, dear Christina, need you volunteer explanations: it would be with unnecessary spontaneousness inflicting pain upon yourself. Ah! I recollect, in reference to that outrage which made my blood boil, dearest Christina—I wrote to Mr. Redcliffe from Ramsgate, telling him what had happened, immediately after the receipt of your letter describing the circumstances: for I have constantly been in the habit of thus communicating with him who has now proved so generous a benefactor. He assured me last night that he is not ignorant who the vile authoress of the outrage was, and that she will be punished for that and other offences which have come to his knowledge."

The vehicle now stopped at Mrs. Macaulay's house; and that female herself came forth to welcome Christina.

"Dear me, Miss Ashton!" exclaimed the garrulous landlady, "how wonderfully you have improved since last I saw you! I was telling your brother yesterday that he too had improved: but really in respect to yourself——"

"My dear Mrs. Macaulay," said Christina, smiling and blushing, "you are pleased to compliment me: but I can assure you——"

"Oh, no compliment at all!" interjected the garrulous landlady: "you are the most beautiful creature that ever honoured the threshold of my house by crossing it. Ah! and there is that odious Mrs. Sifkin looking out of her parlour-window—and she will be ready to eat her own head off with spite at seeing such an elegant young gentleman and such a charming young lady entering at my door."

"Rather an impossible feat for Mrs. Sifkin to perform—is it not, Mrs. Macaulay?" observed Christian, smiling good-naturedly; "and certainly one far transcending the importance of the occasion."

"Oh, you know not the spite of that odious woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Macaulay. "It was but the other day she told Mrs. Bunkley, which does my mangling——Ah! I forgot," ejaculated the worthy woman, suddenly interrupting herself, "I have such news for you! Only look here—in yesterday's paper, amongst the list of Bankrupts—Mr. Samuel Emmanuel of the great Clothing Emporium! Gone all to smashes—and serve him right! That great coarse vulgar-looking wife of his won't be hung with massive gold chains any more, like a turkey with sausages at Christmas. But I see that you are in a hurry; and Mr. Redcliffe is waiting anxiously for you both."

Mrs. Macaulay—who had hitherto barred the way in the passage, that she might indulge in her garrulous propensities and have this little chat with the twins—now stepped aside; and they were enabled to pass her. They ascended to Mr. Redcliffe's sitting-apartment, where Christina experienced the kindest welcome from that gentleman. After a little conversation Mr. Redcliffe inquired whether she had brought with her those memorials of her long deceased mother, which, through Christian, he had expressed a wish to behold?

"Yes," answered our heroine, with a tone and look of tender sadness, as she produced a small casket of oriental workmanship, and which was one of the numerous gifts she had received from the Princess of Inderabad.

Mr. Redcliffe took the casket from her hand—and opened it with as reverential an air as the twins themselves could have displayed when proceeding to the contemplation of memorials that so intimately concerned themselves. First he drew forth a long tress of raven hair—a tress which we have described in an earlier chapter of this narrative as one that must have constituted part of a luxuriant mass which might have formed the glory of a queen—aye, or the envy of a queen!—and while he surveyed it with a long and earnest attention, the brother and sister instinctively wound their arms about each other's neck, and pressed each other's hand, as they exchanged looks of unspeakable fondness. Then Mr. Redcliffe drew forth from the casket a beautiful gold watch of delicate fashion and exquisite workmanship; and as he contemplated it, the tears trickled down his cheeks.

"He feels for us," whispered Christian to his sister: "this excellent kind-hearted man—the most generous benefactor we have ever known—feels for our orphan condition."

"Yes—Mr. Redcliffe can appreciate," responded Christina, "the feelings with which you and I, dear brother, have been wont to gaze for hours and hours on the memorials of a mother who was snatched from us ere we had intelligence to comprehend her loss!"

Clement Redcliffe now opened another little packet which he took from the casket; and this packet contained two rings. One has been already described as a wedding-ring: the other, likewise a lady's, was of no considerable value but of exquisite workmanship. And now Mr. Redcliffe proceeded to the window with these two rings; and as he contemplated them, his back was turned towards the orphans. There he remained for at least five minutes—motionless as a statue—with his eyes evidently riveted upon the rings; and the orphans did not approach him. They still felt persuaded that in the goodness of his heart he was deeply touched on their account, while surveying these relics of their long dead mother. It was altogether a scene of the most pathetic interest; and the tears were trickling down the beautifully handsome face of Christian and the sweetly beautiful countenance of Christina.

Mr. Redcliffe at length turned slowly away from the window. His complexion, which has been described as being made up of sallowness bronzed with the sun, now appeared of a dead white: his face was indeed ghastly pale. That cold stern look which he habitually wore, and which was almost saturnine, chilling the beholder who was unaccustomed to it—had totally disappeared, and was succeeded by one of the deepest melancholy: but it was a mournfulness that had something awfully solemn in it. He advanced towards the twins; and taking their hands he said, in a voice that was scarcely audible, "My dear children—for as such I mean to look upon you henceforth—I can weep with you over those memorials of the mother who died in your infancy! You love and revere her memory——Oh! never fail thus to cherish—thus to cling to it!—for it is sweet to think of a departed parent who is now a saint in heaven!"

At the same moment the same idea struck the twins;—simultaneously too were their looks bent in eager anxious inquiry upon Mr. Redcliffe's countenance: and their lips gave utterance at the same moment to precisely the same words.

"Our mother—did you know her?"

Mr. Redcliffe turned aside—raised his hand to his brow—and for an instant seemed to stagger as if under the influence of a hurricane of memories sweeping through his brain. The orphans watched him with a still more earnest gaze—a still more anxious interest than before: for they felt as if they stood upon the threshold of hitherto unanticipated revealings.

"Yes—I knew her," slowly responded Mr. Redcliffe, again turning towards the brother and sister: "I knew your poor mother! It is this circumstance, my dear children, which inspires me with so vivid an interest on your behalf——But you must ask me no questions at present—I can tell you nothing more yet! The time may shortly come when——But do not press me now! Above all things, breathe not a syllable elsewhere of what has taken place between us! Let it be sufficient for you to know that in me you have found one who will watch over your interests—who will study your welfare—and who will be unto you both as a friend, a guardian, and a father!"

Mr. Redcliffe folded the twins in his arms, and wept over them. They knelt at his feet, murmuring forth in broken voices the expressions of their gratitude: for it was sweet indeed—Ah, it was sweet for this youthful brother and sister to possess the friendship, the guardianship, and the love of one who had known their mother! He raised them up from their kneeling posture: again he embraced them both; and then relocking the casket, he said to Christina, "Keep you these valuables, my dear girl, with the most sedulous care!—keep them, I say, not merely as the memorials of your deceased mother, but as objects which may sooner or later prove of importance in another sense."

"Will you keep them for us?" asked both the twins, speaking as it were in the same breath.

Mr. Redcliffe reflected for a moment: and then he said, "Yes, I will keep them!—but I hope and trust it will only be for a short while that I may thus feel it safer to take charge of these valuables—and then shall they be restored unto you. Ask me nothing more now—and let us turn the conversation upon other subjects."

Mr. Redcliffe hastened to lock up the casket in a secure place; and the remainder of the day was passed by himself and the orphans with that affectionate and friendly intercourse which naturally followed the scenes that had taken place, and the new light in which they respectively stood—namely, he as their guardian and protector, and they as the grateful recipients of his kindness and his bounty.

CHAPTER XC.

THE SMEDLEYS AGAIN.

We must once more request the reader to accompany us to the Smedleys' habitation situated in one of those narrow streets which lie between the lower parts of the Waterloo and Westminster Roads. The house had precisely the same appearance as when we first described it in an earlier chapter of this narrative—with the difference that there was a neatly written card in one of the windows, announcing lodgings to let. The brass plate on the front door, indicating the avocation of Mr. Smedley as a goldbeater, was well polished, as was its wont: the gilt arm, clutching the hammer in its fist as a farther illustration of that individual's calling, was equally resplendent. The two windows of the first floor had their dark moreen curtains and their white blinds as usual; and Mr. Smedley himself was as constant an attendant at the chapel next door as when we first introduced him to our reader.

It was evening—and Mr. and Mrs. Smedley were seated together in their little parlour on the ground floor. There was a bottle of spirits upon the table; and the somewhat inflamed countenance of Bab Smedley showed that she had been indulging in her predilection for strong waters. Not however that she had imbibed thereof so copiously on the present occasion as to affect her reason—but only sufficient to render her somewhat sharper and more querulous in her observations to her husband. They were discussing the circumstances of their position, and deliberating on the plans which they ought to adopt: but it was in low whispering voices that they for the most part addressed each other,—though every now and then the woman's ejaculations became louder with the petulant impatience of her utterance; and then Jack Smedley would interpose a timid and hasty "Hush!"

Presently Mrs. Smedley, consulting her husband's silver watch which lay upon the table, said, "It is close upon nine o'clock, Jack: you must be off with that money."

"And I will just take a few of those religious tracts," said Smedley, rising from his seat: "because if I happen to be seen putting anything into those chaps' hands, and if any question is asked, I can easily declare that it was one of these godly publications."

"Be off with you, with your godly publications!" ejaculated Bab Smedley with an air of supreme disgust: and she forthwith proceeded to mix herself another glass of spirits and water.

Jack Smedley wrapped a pound's worth of silver in a piece of paper, and deposited the little packet in his waistcoat pocket. He took a handful of the religious tracts; and saying to his wife, "When I come back we will continue our deliberations,"—he issued from the house.

Glancing hastily up and down the narrow street with the anxious look of a man whose conscience was not so pure that he had nothing to dread, Jack Smedley continued his way. To two or three of his neighbours who were standing on their thresholds, as the inhabitants of poor neighbourhoods are accustomed to do, he addressed a passing observation in a tone of the most friendly familiarity: but it was only a very cold response that in each instance he received. Muttering to himself an imprecation against the individuals who were thus frigid towards him, Smedley continued his way; and in about ten minutes he reached Mint Street. Some little improvement had within the last few years been made in this neighbourhood: but it was still at the time at which we are writing—as it also is at the present day—the resort of all society's lowest and vilest outcasts.

Every now and then Jack Smedley looked back to see if he were followed by any suspicious individual; and in order to give a colour to his visit to this vile neighbourhood, he occasionally put a tract into some hand that was thrust forth with the expectation of receiving alms. This proceeding on Mr. Smedley's part brought down upon him the curse of disappointment or the gibe of ridicule: but he cared not.

At length Mr. Smedley reached the corner of a narrow diverging street, or rather miserable obscure alley; and there he beheld a couple of ill-looking, squalid, ragged youths, standing together. These were the brothers Bill and Tim Scott; and in no way was their hideous personal appearance altered since we first introduced them to the reader.

Now Jack Smedley glanced around him with even a more searching anxiety than he had previously displayed: but flattering himself that the coast was perfectly clear, so far as any suspicious-looking individual was concerned, he took the little packet of money from his waistcoat-pocket, and thrust it into the outstretched hand of Bill Scott. The large goggle eyes of the miserable being glistened with a greedy delight; and his stunted brother Tim, catching hold of Jack Smedley's sleeve, asked impatiently, "How much have you gived him? cos why he's safe to bilk his own brother, if so be he has a chance!"

"You'll find a pound in that paper," responded the gold-beater quickly. "But don't detain me! —and for heaven's sake don't stand looking about in the street, or go and get drunk at any boozing-ken and make fools of yourselves."

"Never you mind us, Mr. Smedley!" said Bill Scott, the elder brother. "But what of Barney? Is he took agin?—or has nuffin been heard on him?"

"Nothing," replied Smedley; "and he has not been retaken—at least not to my knowledge. I always look at the newspaper——"

"Well, I s'pose Barney will turn up agin some of these here days," said Bill Scott: "and the sooner the better—for I'm getting unkimmon tired of this here hide-and-seek sort of a life."

"You ought to be thankful," responded Smedley, "that you've got such a good friend in me. But I can't stop another moment. This day week—at precisely the same hour——"

"Where is it to be?" asked Bill Scott.

"Where?"—and after an instant's musing, Jack Smedley added, "At the back of St. George's Church."

Having thus spoken, the goldbeater turned upon his heel, and retraced his way rapidly along Mint Street—taking care however the while to be more profuse in his tract-distribution than while proceeding in the contrary direction. Frequent were the anxious glances which he rapidly flung around:

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but he had no particular reason to suspect that he was watched, dogged, or followed.

We must however see what had in the meantime been taking place at his own house. Immediately after his departure Bab Smedley took a deep draught from the tumbler which she had just filled; and she was sitting in rumination on the topics of their recent discourse,—when a knock at the front door startled the woman from her reverie. It was not a single knock—it was not precisely a double one, in the usual acceptance of the term, which means a series of strokes: but it was something between the two. Bab Smedley took up the candle from the table, and hastened to answer the summons. The person whom she found at the door was a middle-aged man—of quiet, sedate, respectable appearance — plainly but decently dressed—and who looked like a clerk or small tradesman.

"Are you the mistress of the house?" asked the individual, with a bow that was sufficiently polite.

"I am, sir," responded Bab,—"and the master too, for that matter!" she thought within herself: for she experienced an unmitigated contempt for her husband, and the feeling was inseparable from her ideas.

"Can I say a few words to you?" asked the stranger.

"To be sure!" replied Mrs. Smedley, without however making the slightest move as an invitation for the individual to enter.

"You have lodgings to let?" he said; but looking about him as much as to imply that he would rather speak to her in-doors.

"We *had*, sir," Mrs. Smedley immediately responded; "but they were let this afternoon to a very respectable old couple that have known us for a great many years."

"And yet the bill is still up in the window?" said the applicant, stepping back a pace or two to assure himself by another glance that such was the fact.

"Oh, is it?" said Mrs. Smedley coolly. "Then I forgot to take it down—and I will do so at once. I am sorry you should have had the trouble, sir——"

"Oh, no trouble! But perhaps you may have a spare room—I only want one——"

"No spare room now, sir. Good evening to you:"—and Bab Smedley shut the door in the face of the applicant, who seemed much inclined to keep her in discourse.

She returned into the parlour, and at once took down the card announcing that lodgings were to be let. She evidently did not much like the visit; and reseating herself, fell into a gloomy reverie, which was only occasionally interrupted by a recurrence to the spirits-and-water. In about twenty minutes after the little incident we have described, Jack Smedley returned; and Bab at once vented her ill-humour upon him.

"What was the use of your keeping that card stuck up in the window? I told you more than once that I would not have it; and yet——"

"But, my dear Bab, do hear reason!" interrupted her husband, as he resumed his seat at the table.

"Yes—when you can talk it, and not before!" exclaimed the vigaro. "But what have you done?"

"Those hungry dogs," responded Jack, "were at the place of appointment, waiting for their weekly money; and I told them where to be the next time it falls due. But don't you think Bab it is a very hard thing we should have to allow these fellows a pound a week——"

"How can we help ourselves?" demanded Mrs. Smedley. "Isn't there a warrant out for Bill Scott's apprehension? and isn't he therefore obliged to play at hide-and-seek? and if his brother Tim was to go out prigging in order to keep them both, wouldn't he be dogged and followed, so that Bill would be certain to be arrested? There's no doubt it's hard enough upon us—but we can't help ourselves. As for that card there——"

"Now do listen, Bab!" said her husband entreatingly. "When that cursed business at Liverpool exploded, and your mother got into her present trouble, weren't we obliged to do all we could to keep up the appearance of our own respectability? Didn't we assure the neighbours that it was totally impossible Mrs. Webber could have committed the deed—that there was some terrible mistake—and that her innocence would transpire on the trial?"

"And the neighbours don't believe us," interjected Bab, sullenly.

"No—I'm sorry to say they don't altogether believe us," responded her husband; "or at least don't know exactly what to think. They speak cool and look distant: but I do my best to ride it with a high hand, and seem as if I did not notice their altered behaviour. Well, I advised that the card should be kept up in the window as usual, just as if we felt our own respectability to be totally unimpaired, and as if we were at least conscious of our own innocence. Besides, the keeping up of the card was only a blind: for we agreed that we would not let the lodgings even if anybody applied: because you and I have always so many things to talk about now, and we must not stand the chance of being overheard. And then too, the Burker may turn up at any moment —for Barney is such a desperate fellow, he's almost certain to find his way to London—and if he does, he would be sure to come to us, the worst luck on it!"

"There's enough!" ejaculated Mrs. Smedley. "Some one has been to apply for the lodgings; and I don't like his appearance a bit, I can tell you."

"Who?" asked the goldbeater, with a look full of startled anxiety.

"Ah! who?" ejaculated Bab. "How do I know? But who should come prying about this place here, and trying on all sorts of dodges to get in amongst us for more reasons than one——"

"Do you—do you think he was a—a—detective?" asked Jack Smedley, with an awful elongation of his pale countenance.

"As like as not!" rejoined Bab petulantly. "However, I stalled him off—I told him the lodgings were let to a decent old couple—I was precious short with him—and I shut the door. Now, the fact is, Jack, things can't go on like this: I am getting uncommon tired of living constantly on the fidgets——"

"Not more tired than me, I know!" exclaimed her husband. "Didn't I propose a bolt to France immediately after your mother got into trouble? but it was you that said we must stick here at all hazards; and when we decided to remain, I did the best I could to keep up a show of respectability——"

"Of course I said we would remain!" ejaculated Mrs. Smedley. "Do you think that the house wasn't constantly watched after mother went down to Liverpool to Lettice Rodney's trial? and it would have been madness for us to have thought of a move—suspicion would have been excited in a moment. But after that girl Rodney's trial things looked better for us—though they went so dead against mother——"

"Yes—I know the detective said at Lettice Rodney's trial," observed Jack Smedley, "that he had nothing to allege against *our* respectability."

"Well, then," continued Bab, "it was better for us to go on living here: but when two or three weeks back people began asking how it was that the old lodger of our's disappeared so suddenly in the winter——"

"Ah! that was the thing that began to frighten me too," interjected the goldbeater; "and then came the news of the Burker's escape, and the fright we've been in lest he should come here to get us both into such trouble that we could never hope to get out of it——"

"That is nothing," interrupted Bab, "in comparison with the other thing we were speaking about before you went out to meet those Scotts."

"Ah! you mean your mother?" said Jack Smedley, with a significant look, at the same time that he drew his chair closer to his wife. "Do you—do you really think," he asked, with a very pale face, "that the old woman is likely to peach?"

"I didn't think so at first," answered Bab—"or else I shouldn't have insisted that we were to remain here. But lately, the more I've thought over the matter the more I am convinced there is every thing to be dreaded in that quarter. There's no use disguising the fact, Jack—you never was a favourite with mother: and as for any love for me, her daughter—it's all nonsense! If she thought she could do herself any good by turning round upon us and telling how two or three have gone down there——"

"Yes, yes—I know!" said Jack Smedley shuddering, as his wife pointed in a downward direction. "But the quicklime——"

"Well, the quicklime has no doubt done its work long ago," interrupted Bab, "even in respect to that man Smith—or Preston, I should say——"

"By the bye," interrupted Jack, "what have you done with his letter—you know—and also the packet of papers we took out from under the flooring of his house in Cambridge Terrace?"

"Never mind the papers!" exclaimed Bab petulantly: "I have put them where they are safe enough—though little use they ever stand the chance of being to us or our affairs: for when we made secret inquiries about those young Ashtons, we heard they were living in a wretched poor lodging in Camden Town, and hadn't the means of rewarding any one who would give them up those papers. It has been of no use to make any inquiries since: for it is not very likely their condition is much improved. But let us return to what we were saying——"

"Yes—about your mother?" suggested Jack Smedley.

"Well then, about my mother," continued Bab. "You know what my opinion is—I tell you that mother will peach if it answers her purpose. She has not sent us any reply to the two or three letters we have written, and which I so carefully worded that she could not fail to understand the game we had to play——"

"Perhaps she is offended," observed Jack Smedley, "at our writing in that sort of sanctimonious strain?"

"Offended?—nonsense!" exclaimed Bab. "How could she be offended? She knows very well that we must be aware all letters going to her would be opened by the gaol-authorities, and that we were therefore compelled to write in a particular way. But never mind all this!—it is of no use arguing the point. I tell you that if mother lives on to go through her trial and be condemned to death, she will peach as sure as you are Jack Smedley!"

"If she lives?" said the man, catching at those words which appeared to have some covert meaning.

"Yes—if she lives," answered Bab, repeating those words. "And therefore she must *not* live—and if you are a man, Jack——"

"I am man enough to do anything to secure our safety," responded the goldbeater. "Only show me how——"

"Now look you!" replied Bab: "I understand mother well enough—and a great deal better than you do. She would like to put herself out of the way before the trial comes on——of *that* I am convinced! But if the trial is once over, and she is condemned to death, and the croaking parsons get hold of her, you may depend upon it she will out with everything!"

"Then what is to be done?" asked Jack Smedley.

"What is to be done?" echoed his wife, with an air of mingled impatience and contempt: "what *should* be done but for you to——" and she whispered a few words in the ears of her husband.

"But would you have me do this?" he asked, gazing upon her as if he thought that she could scarcely be in earnest, or that she meant to put him to a test for some other and ulterior purpose.

"Of course I would!" rejoined the fiend-like woman: "everything for our own safety! Let what will happen to the Burker, we know that he is staunch; and I feel convinced that nothing could induce him to turn round upon his pals. The more savage and ferocious a person is, the more sure is he or she to be true to friends and associates. As for those Scotts—we will get them safe out of the country; and then, if once mother is put out of the way, we have got little or nothing to fear."

"Well, I don't know," said Jack Smedley, in a sort of dismayed musing—"I had a very bad dream last night. I thought the black cat was scouring all over the house—that some strange man came in to look after her—that she cut down stairs into the scullery—hid herself underneath the table—and therefore sate right upon that trapdoor——"

"Stuff and nonsense, with your black cats!" cried Bab Smedley.

"Just wait a moment," interposed Jack. "I thought that the strange man went down into the scullery—found the cat there—discovered the trap-door—and then all in an instant turned into a policeman. But you know, Bab, that the night we did that last piece of business—I mean Preston's affair—the cat did cut about the house in such a strange way that I told you at the time I didn't like it: it seemed an omen of evil. But really," asked Jack, abruptly, "what is to prevent us from making a bolt now? Why not get over to France? We may then dispense with this new business about your mother—we need not care what happens to the Burker—and we shall no longer have to pension those Scotts."

"And what if the police have their eye upon us?" demanded Mrs. Smedley: "what if that man who came to-night is a detective who wants to get into the house under pretence of being a lodger, that he may all the better play the spy upon us? I tell you I am certain that if we were to make such a move as would show we intended flight, we should both be pounced upon at once on some pretence or another. It is only by staying here, and seeming to rely on our respectability, that we are safe. The police are evidently puzzled about us: they don't know what to think—they fancy we may be all right—and as long as we give them no cause to think otherwise, we are safe. They may try by all kinds of dodges to know more of us and peer into our secrets: but there's no chance of their going to the length of laying hands upon us. We must therefore use the opportunity we now have to get rid of obstacles and overcome perils—so as to make ourselves completely safe. Now, that is my view of the matter—and it *must* be acted upon," added Bab peremptorily.

"But what if I go to Liverpool?" asked Jack, considerably re-assured, though not completely so, by his wife's arguments.

"Natural enough!" she exclaimed,—"to see your mother-in-law—to remonstrate with her on her wickedness if she is guilty—to console and strengthen her if she is innocent! Will those reasons do, Jack? Come now, you have played the sanctimonious long enough amongst those snivelling, canting, whining hypocrites next door"—alluding to the chapel—"to be able to perform the same part with great effect at Liverpool. Take a clean white cravat with you—put on your longest face—and don't fear as to the result. What you require is fortunately in the house——"

"How?" exclaimed Smedley.

"The phial of prussic acid," rejoined his wife. "Don't you remember, we found it amongst Preston's effects? Forger as he was, and always trembling at the idea of being arrested, he no doubt had the poison in readiness for any moment. It is lucky for our present purpose; because it would otherwise be dangerous for you just now to go out and buy it."

We need not chronicle any more of the discourse which took place between this delectable husband and wife: suffice it to say that everything was settled between them for the carrying out of their nefarious purpose. At an early hour in the morning Jack Smedley went amongst two or three of his neighbours, with the intimation that he was going to Liverpool to see his mother-in-law; and he officiously undertook to execute whatsoever commissions they might choose to charge him with. He however received cold and distant responses, to which he had been lately accustomed: but his present purpose was answered—he had openly declared his intention of visiting Liverpool—and if there were really police spies in the neighbourhood, they could not think that he meditated a total flight altogether.

To Liverpool Mr. Smedley repaired: and in the evening he arrived in that town. It was too late for him to see his mother-in-law: but on the following morning, at the earliest hour permitted by the prison regulations, he was introduced into her cell. He found the old woman still in bed; and when he made his appearance, she surveyed him with looks of mingled spite, mistrust, and aversion.

"Well, mother-in-law," said Jack, when the turnkey had retired, "as you didn't write to us, Bab and I thought the best thing to be done was for me to run down and see you."

"I wish I had never seen you at all!" answered Mrs. Webber growlingly,—"never in all my life! It was you who concocted this precious business that has got me into such trouble; and, O dear! O dear! to think how it will end—to think how it will end!"

The wretched woman sate up in bed, and rocked herself to and fro as she thus spoke. She was frightfully altered. Thin and emaciated, she was worn almost to a skeleton—not by remorse for the crimes she had committed—but with horror at the incessant contemplation of the penalty she would soon have to pay for them. There was something fearful in the expression of her countenance: she seemed like a starved tiger-cat that could have sprung at any one approaching, as if to avenge the doom that appeared certain to overtake herself. Jack Smedley was frightened by her look—while her words seemed to justify all the misgivings which her daughter Barbara had entertained concerning her.

"Come, mother-in-law," he said, plucking up his presence of mind as well as he was able; "don't be angry with me—I did all for the best."

"And the worst has come of it!" interjected Mrs. Webber sharply; "and I have got to bear all its brunt. I tell you what, Jack," she went on to say, her eyes glaring with fierceness upon him,—"those who commit crimes in concert, should also share the punishment in concert: or else there's no fairness and no justice! I feel as if I was made a scapegoat of——"

"Nonsense, mother-in-law!" exclaimed Jack Smedley. "When people embark in these sort of things, they each and all take their fair and equal chance. It might have happened to Bab—it might have happened to me——"

"*You!* you white-livered scoundrel!" ejaculated Mrs. Webber, with a look of withering contempt: "you would have turned round and peached on all the rest the very first instant. Bab too is as selfish as she can be. Look at the letters you have both written me!—full of that canting nonsense of your's, the infection of which Bab seems to have caught!"

"How could we write otherwise?" asked Smedley. "Come, do be reasonable, mother-in-law——"

"Reasonable indeed!" cried the wretched woman:

"am I not in a state that is enough to drive one mad? You and my daughter are all for yourselves—you wrote to me when you should have come——"

"The house was watched by the police," interjected Smedley: "and therefore——"

"How is it, then, that you are here now?" demanded Mrs. Webber sharply: "and what devil's business has brought you to me? Can you help me to escape, Jack?—can you with all your art and cunning set me free, as the Burker has liberated himself?"

"If it were possible," responded Smedley, "I should——"

"Possible!" cried Mrs. Webber, contemptuously. "Nothing is possible with you, except sneaking villany and covert cowardly crime. But anything bold—no, nothing of the sort! Look you, Jack Smedley—if I go to the scaffold it shall not be alone!"

"Mother-in-law!" he ejaculated vehemently.

"Hold your tongue, and listen! Companionship is always sweet—and not the less so in death. At all events it will be a consolation for me to know that I am not the most miserable person in existence at that last instant!"

"But, mother-in-law," faltered forth Jack Smedley, with a countenance white as a sheet, "would you hang your own daughter?"

"She leaves me here to be hanged!" retorted the woman fiercely: "she does not come near me!"

"She has sent you plenty of money, mother-in-law," interposed Jack in accents of remonstrance and deprecation.

"Yes—to fee counsel in a hopeless cause!" cried Mrs. Webber. "I tell you what it is—I feel in that state of mind that I could wreak a vengeance upon the whole world!—all the bonds of kith and kin are broken!—I know nobody but enemies! That is my state of mind! And if you had the gibbet looming ever before your eyes—if you had a sensation as of a cord ever round your neck—if you had night and day to look death in the face—you, Jack Smedley, would feel even worse than I do. It is enough to drive one crazed—crazed—crazed!"

Again the old woman rocked herself to and fro; and her son-in-law felt as if his purpose were completely frustrated. He knew not what to say next: there was a perfect consternation in his mind: he thought that she might even denounce him as the accomplice of her numerous crimes, the instant the turnkey should come back to conduct him away from her cell.

"Jack Smedley," she said, at length breaking a somewhat long pause, "tell me for what purpose you have come here now. If I thought it was to serve me in any way—if I thought you had the courage to furnish me the means of escape——"

"Tell me what those means are, mother-in-law," quickly ejaculated the goldbeater; "and I promise you they shall be forthcoming. Do you want a file—a crowbar—a rope-ladder——"

"Fool!" interrupted the old woman with bitterest scorn, "how can I, a poor weak feeble creature, reduced to the mere shadow of what I was,—how can I accomplish that which a strong powerful determined man, as the Burker, could only just succeed in effecting? No—it is not by such means as those that I may escape hence! But there is something which will enable me to evade the ordeal of trial—the horror of condemnation—aye, and that last hideous frightful scene which I shudder to contemplate! And more too—it is something that will save me from the horrible chance of betraying my own daughter in my madness!"

"And that something?" ejaculated Smedley, with the almost breathless eagerness of suspense.

Mrs. Webber looked very hard at him for nearly a minute; and then a word—a single word—came in a slow whisper from her lips—a word which made her son-in-law start suddenly, although what she had previously said had more than half prepared him for the climax.

And that one word was—"Poison!"

"Do you mean it, mother-in-law?" he asked, clutching her wrist and looking her intently in the face.

"I mean it!" she responded. "But of what use," was her immediate contemptuous addition, "is it for me to make such a request, since I already see that your craven heart——"

"Enough, mother-in-law!—you do not understand me," hurriedly whispered the goldbeater. "I have poison with me!"

"Poison with you?" she echoed, a wild joy flashing forth in unearthly light from her eyes. "Is it possible? But how? You are not deceiving me?"

"No, no—I am not deceiving you," rejoined the goldbeater quickly. "Can you not understand that Bab and I feel ourselves to be environed by dangers? Yes—we know that we are standing upon a mine which may explode at any instant. Therefore we are prepared! We have breathed a solemn vow that the hangman's cord shall never touch our necks. On this we are resolved! Do you remember the phial of poison——"

"Ah! the prussic acid," said Mrs. Webber, eagerly, "which was found amongst Preston's effects?"

"The same!" rejoined Smedley. "There is the phial—it contains half the fluid which originally filled it. Bab has the other half."

"And will you give it to me?" demanded the woman, yearning for the deadly venom with as strong an avidity as if she were famished and it was food that she was imploring: "will you surrender up your share? can you for once in your life, Jack Smedley, do a generous action?"

The goldbeater pretended to hesitate for a few moments: but if his simulated hesitation had only lasted an instant longer, that fierce tiger-cat—his mother-in-law—would have flown at him to tear the phial from his grasp.

"Yes—take it!" he said, just in time to prevent such a scene: and he placed the phial in her hand.

"Oh, to cheat the gallows! to avoid the hangman! to escape the horrors of the gazing crowd!"—and the woman in an unnatural frenzy of joy pressed the phial to her lips.

"But my dear mother-in-law," whispered Jack Smedley, bending down towards her ear, "you will not take that poison for two or three days?—you will not compromise me?"

"No—I can afford to spare you now," answered Mrs. Webber: "for you have done me at least one service in my lifetime—a service that gives me the means of death! And now go—leave me! I am no puling foolish creature that can descend to slobbering farewells and sickly leave-takings ——But stay one moment! You need not tell Bab that I hinted in my frenzy at the idea of betraying either you or her: for I should not have done it — it was mere madness at the time! And now go."

She waved her hand to her son-in-law, who opening the little trap at the door of the cell, called for the turnkey who was stationed at a grating at the end of the passage; and that functionary speedily arrived to afford Jack Smedley egress from the prisoner's chamber.

CHAPTER XCI.

THE SUBTERRANEAN.

It was evening, some five or six days after the interview of Jack Smedley with his mother-in-law; and his wife Barbara sate alone in the little parlour at their abode in London. She was reflecting upon what her husband had done at Liverpool, and bestowing an equal part of her attention on the glass of spirits-and-water which stood on the table. She had been rendered aware of Jack Smedley's successful mission to Mrs. Webber, inasmuch as he had written from Liverpool to his wife—but in a very guarded strain, for fear of the communication being intercepted. They had however agreed beforehand between themselves on some phrase that was to be introduced in case of success, while another phrase was to indicate failure. The former had found its introduction into the body of the epistle; and amidst a series of canting sentences and studied hypocrisies, the goldbeater thus found the means of setting his wife's mind at rest on the one grand important point.

Upon this she was cogitating—and dividing, as we have said, her attention between the subject of her thoughts and the liquor to which she had become so wedded. It was nine o'clock; and the servant-girl who attended for a certain period during the day, entered to inquire whether anything more were wanted from her this evening. A response was given in the negative: the girl took her departure; and Mrs. Smedley was now alone in the house. She knew not how it was—she could not account for it—but assuredly did it seem as if a chill smote her the instant the front door closed behind that girl. Bab Smedley was by no means the woman to yield to the influence of vague presentiments or ungrounded alarms: but she liked not this feeling which took possession of her—neither could she shake it off. She applied herself with additional vigour to the spirits-and-water: potations appeared to do her no good —on the contrary, they seemed to render her all the more nervous. Contemptuously as she had been wont to look upon her husband, she wished he was at home now for companionship's sake.

All of a sudden she fancied she heard a noise in the back part of the house; and for the first time in her life Bab Smedley was seized with such a terror that she could not rise from her chair to ascertain what the sound was. Then, as slowly recovering courage she looked around, she started on beholding the great black cat lying on a chair and gazing at her with its large green glassy eyes. She remembered the ominous instinct with which her husband's terrified imagination had endowed the animal on the night of Preston's murder; and she recoiled from the glare of those eyes.

The sound was renewed: this time she became aware that it was a knocking at the back door; and snatching up the candle, she proceeded from the room to answer the summons.

"It must be one of those Scotts—or else the Burker himself," she thought as she threaded the passage: "unless it is Jack come home and got himself into some scrape—for nobody else but one of these would come to the back door at this time of the evening."

She opened the door; and the light flashed upon the hang-dog countenance of Barney the Burker.

Bab Smedley exhibited no surprise: for, as the reader has seen, she was more or less prepared for such a visit. She hastily closed the door, and led the way into the parlour before a single word was spoken between them. The shutter was already fastened outside the window, over which the curtains inside were drawn; and thus there was no fear of the man's presence in that room being perceived from without. Filling Bab's tumbler completely up to the brim with the alcholic liquor, the Burker drained the contents at a draught; and beyond a slight brief winking of the eyes, no sign on his part indicated the strength or depth of the potation. He threw himself upon a seat,—saying, "So here I am at last, Bab, once more in London: though I can't say as how I'm werry sound in limb—or that I'm over sure of being safe in respect to that personal liberty which is the right of every free-born indiwidual."

"And where do you come from?" inquired Mrs. Smedley, who had leisure to observe the careworn haggard appearance of the Burker, as well as to judge that he was sinking with fatigue.

"Ah! where do I come from?—that's the question!" he responded with a certain degree of rough bitterness in his tone. "Wheresomever there's a quiet ditch that a man may lay down in when he's got no bed—wheresomever there's a lonesome haystack that a houseless wanderer may snatch a snooze under—wheresomever there's fields and woods and all sorts of unfrequented places as far as possible from the towns and villages which a chap doesn't dare enter for fear of seeing a printed description of hisself with 'A Hundred Pound Reward' in big letters a-top, posted up agin the walls,—there's the places from which I come."

Having concluded this piece of eloquence after his own fashion, the Burker looked Mrs. Smedley very hard in the face for nearly a minute, as much as to say, "Well, what do you think of that?"—and then he brewed himself a tumbler of spirits-and-water, which he proceeded to drink at a more moderate rate than the previous one.

"Perhaps you would like something to eat?" suggested Mrs. Smedley.

"Well, now you mention it, I think I should like summut," answered the Burker; "though only a minute back I fancied I was past eating: for I ain't broke my fast since eight o'clock this morning—and then I should have got nuffin if I hadn't gived a boy a couple of taps on the head to make him surrender a wedge of bread and cheese he was a-breakfasting on as he went to his work."

Mrs. Smedley proceeded to the larder—whence she quickly returned with some cold beef, bread, and pickles; and the Burker, falling to, speedily made a meal that would have sufficed for half-a-dozen ordinary appetites. Another tumbler was produced; and Mrs. Smedley joined him in the drinking department.

"And where's Jack?" he inquired in the midst of his repast.

"Jack's at Liverpool," rejoined Mrs. Smedley: and she explained the object of his mission, not forgetting to add her knowledge of its success, so far as that the phial of poison was conveyed to her mother's hand.

"Well I'm blowed," said the Burker, "if Jack hasn't proved hisself to be a feller of more pluck than I'd have gived him credit for. But why is he staying at Liverpool?"

"He thought it best to make a show of lingering there a bit, so that he might see the chaplain and a justice-of-the-peace or two, and snivel and whimper and play the hypocrite——"

"Ah!" interrupted the Burker, with a look of approval and envy, "Jack can come it strong in that there line. Well?"

"Because, don't you see," continued Bab, "if he had bolted off immediately after that interview with his mother-in-law, it might have been suspected that he gave her the poison: whereas by staying there for two or three days, and going and talking to the authorities—pretending that he was overwhelmed with grief—that he didn't know what to think, whether she had really committed the crime, or whether she was the innocent victim of circumstantial evidence——"

"Ah, that's the ticket!" ejaculated the Burker, with his mouth full of beef and bread: "nothing like coming the artful dodge——And who can do it better than my friend Jack Smedley?"

"And so, you see, Jack is stopping at Liverpool," continued Bab.

"What the deuce makes that there black cat of your'n stare so uncommon hard?" suddenly demanded the Burker.

The woman started: for the question which her companion had just put, all in a moment riveted the conviction that it had not ere now been mere fancy on her part. But unwilling to confess her fears to herself—still less to reveal them to the Burker—Bab Smedley instantaneously composed her countenance; and in a voice of assumed quiet, she said, "There's nothing wrong with the cat: she often looks like that."

"Then, if it was my cat, I'd pison it—that's what I'd do!" rejoined the Burker. "But how is things going on in London? I suppose you heerd tell of my escape——"

"I read it in the newspapers," answered the woman. "As for things in London, we've allowed the Scotts a pound a week—that's one thing: and I rather fancy this house is watched by the detectives—that's another thing."

"The deuce!" growled the Burker. "But I say, Bab——"

Scarcely were the words spoken, when a knock was heard at the front door—a somewhat commanding kind of summons, and which made both Bab Smedley and the Burker spring up to their feet.

"There's something wrong," hastily whispered the former: "I know there is!"

"I'll get out by the back," hastily responded the Burker. "But no!" he instantaneously ejaculated: "if there's a plant meant, there'll be people watching at the back. Come quick! I'll go down the trap—and you can pretend you was asleep and didn't hear the knocking at the door. You must stall 'em off somehow or another, Bab."

"Yes, yes—it's the only chance!"

As the reader may suppose this colloquy took place in very hurried whispers, and occupied far less time than we have taken in describing it. Away from the parlour they glided—Bab shading the light which she carried in her hand: down into the scullery they went—the table was moved away—the bit of carpet also—the trap-door was raised—and into the subterranean went the Burker. Then almost in the twinkling of an eye Bab Smedley restored the little place to its former appearance: she put three or four saucepans and articles of crockery, and other kitchen implements upon the table, to give it an air as if it had not been recently moved; and she sped up-stairs. Meanwhile the knocking had been repeated in a louder and more imperious manner than before: yet all that we have described since the first summons echoed through the house, had not taken more than three minutes.

The feeling that all her presence of mind was now absolutely necessary—or at least apprehending some emergency which would require this display of her courage—Bab Smedley smoothed her countenance; and with a light in her hand, she proceeded to open the front door. A tall stout man at once entered the passage, followed by another individual, a glance at whom showed Mrs. Smedley that it was the applicant for the vacant lodging of a few days previous. She kept her countenance admirably: and said, "Good evening, gentlemen. I suppose you've come to see Mr. Smedley on business: but he's not at home."

"Not at home, eh?" exclaimed the tall stout man. "Are you sure?" and he looked the woman very hard in the face.

"Quite sure," she replied with the coolest effrontery—which indeed was all the more natural inasmuch as at the instant she was telling the truth. "He's at Liverpool, sir; and if you want anything in the goldbeating way——"

"Shut the door, Tom," interrupted the tall man, turning round abruptly to his companion. "Beg pardon, ma'am," he continued, coolly walking into the parlour, whither Mrs. Smedley followed with the light; "but this is no time for ceremony. We're officers—and we want your husband."

"Officers!"—and Mrs. Smedley affected to give a shriek of dismay, as if quite unprepared for the intelligence that thus burst upon her. "Want my husband——"

"Yes—and I'm thinking we're likely to find him too," promptly rejoined the officer, as he glanced at the table. "A late supper, evidently served up in a hurry—no tablecloth, nor nothing tidy—and two tumblers! Come, ma'am, it's no use playing the fool with us: your husband *is* in the house—and we must search for him. There's a couple of my men at the back part of the premises; and Tom there is keeping the front door. So there's no chance of escape. You had better——"

"Good heavens! what has my poor husband done?" exclaimed Mrs. Smedley, as if overwhelmed with grief. "But it is impossible! Jack is as quiet as the child unborn—and a pious man too—such a pious man!"

"I'm sorry to say," interrupted the detective officer—for such he was—"that if you don't really know anything about it already—you've lost your mother."

"My mother!" ejaculated Mrs. Smedley, with a great show of wild astonishment and grief: "you don't surely mean that she has been tried—and—and—already——"

"Executed?" said the officer, calmly finishing the sentence for Mrs. Smedley. "No—not exactly. She's cheated the hangman——In plain terms, ma'am, she poisoned herself in the middle of last night—your husband took the very first train from Liverpool this morning—he was telegraphed up—but somehow or another we just now missed him at the Euston Square Station—though we afterwards learnt that such a person did arrive this evening by that particular train. However, we know he must be here."

"My poor mother!" sobbed Mrs. Smedley. "But what could my husband——"

"Have to do with it?" ejaculated the officer. "Why, he gave her the poison as a matter of course! Who else could possibly have done it?"

"Oh, Sir, I can assure you Jack is incapable of such a thing! He went to Liverpool to see my poor mother—to teach her which was the right path if she had really gone into the wrong one——"

"Come, ma'am—this gammon won't do for us. Tom, let another of our people come in—and you follow me. Sorry to be rude, ma'am—very natural for you to try and screen your husband—but it won't do. Please to favour us with this light."

Bab Smedley had thrown herself upon a chair, in which she now sate rocking herself to and fro with every semblance of being utterly disconsolate, and likewise as if heedless of the words that were spoken to her.

The tall detective took up the candle; and followed by his man Tom, he passed into the back room. No one was there. They ascended the staircase; the upper chambers were speedily searched, but still without success. They descended: and Bab Smedley joined them in the passage,—saying, "Well, gentlemen, you see my husband is not in the house: but I almost wish he was, that he might convince you of the error under which you labour concerning him. A pious vessel like him—a deacon of the Shining Light's Chapel—it is out of the question! But you have behaved so civil in doing your duty, that I hope you'll just step into the parlour for a moment and take a small glass of something?"

"Stop a minute!" said the tall detective: "there's a place down stairs. Come along, Tom."

"Oh, well," said Bab Smedley, still admirably preserving her presence of mind, and simulating an air of mournfulness in which there was no betrayal of anxious apprehension, "you can speedily satisfy yourself in that quarter—and then you shall accept the little refreshment I offer you."

The two detectives descended the stairs,—Bab Smedley following, to procure, as she said, two or three more glasses. Her conduct appeared so natural—her part was performed with such consummate skill—that the detectives began really to think her husband could not be any where about the premises; at the same time that they were not the men to be stayed in the process of their investigation by anything which might possibly be an artifice to divert them from the scent.

The place which we have described as the scullery, was reached: the detectives passed at once into the front kitchen—but, as the reader may imagine, without discovering the object of their search. Cupboards were opened—nooks were pryed into—but all in vain. They repassed into the scullery: the huge door communicating with the cellar was opened—the interior was inspected—but no Jack Smedley was there. The two officers exchanged quick glances, as much as to imply that the woman had spoken truthfully after all, and that their trouble was vainly taken.

"Now, gentlemen," said Bab—and it was a very anxious moment for the woman—but her inward feelings were not outwardly betrayed; "you will perhaps come up to the parlour and have a nice drop of something warm?"

"In a minute, ma'am," answered the tall detective. "But what the deuce does a bit of carpet mean in a place like this?"

He looked searchingly at the goldbeater's wife as he spoke; and she steadily met that scrutinising gaze. The next instant he kicked up the carpet with his foot: but the table stood so exactly over the outlines of the trap-door that the carpet was not dislodged sufficiently to reveal them. The keen experienced eye of the detective led to the fancy that he perceived something like a studied artifice in the arrangement of the kitchen utensils and crockery on the little deal table; and lifting it up, he removed it away from the middle of the scullery. At the same instant he glanced furtively towards the woman: it struck him that for a single moment there was the glitter of uneasiness in her eyes: but if so, that betrayal of her feeling was so transient it could not be regarded as a positive certainty. However, the bit of carpet was now kicked completely away; and the outlines of the trap-door were revealed.

"Ah, here is something, Tom!" said the tall detective, stamping with his feet above the mouth of the pit, so that the hollow sound thus produced confirmed the suspicion of the existence of a trap-door.

The next instant it was raised; and at the same moment a sudden precipitate rush, as if of some wild animal, caused the detectives themselves to start—while a shriek of terror thrilled from the lips of the woman who until this abrupt occurrence had maintained such extraordinary presence of mind. It was the black cat, which had come sweeping down the stairs with a gushing noise of lightning quickness; and making the circuit of the scullery, the animal whisked up the staircase again as if it were wild.

"That's an omen, I suppose?" said the tall de-

tective, looking significantly at the goldbeater's wife, who was pale with terror.

"It is enough to startle anybody," she observed, once more by a mighty effort recovering her self-possession. "It's the presence of you strangers that frightens the poor creature. As for the trap-door here, it only covers a well——"

"With steps to it," said the detective, with an ironical smile.

"Yes—with steps down to a certain distance: they are all broken at the bottom—and if you don't mind——"

"You think we shall be drowned? It's a very curious earthy smell for water to send up; and what's more," added the detective, holding the candle over the opening, "I can't catch the reflection of any water at all."

Bab felt convinced it was all up with the Burker; and she inwardly trembled on account of herself; for her arrest must necessarily follow, if only for the reason that she was harbouring a criminal on whose head a reward was set. She thought of escape: but how could she effect it? There was a man in the passage up-stairs; and she had been told that the back part of the premises was watched by other officers.

"Now, Tom, hold the light," said the tall detective; "and keep an eye——"

He did not finish the sentence—but nodded significantly; and his sedate, quiet-looking, but not the less resolute subordinate comprehended that the allusion bore reference to Mrs. Smedley. Drawing forth a pair of pistols, the detective began to descend the stone steps of the subterranean—while his man held the candle conveniently at the mouth: and the former said in a stern decisive tone, "Now, Mr. Smedley, we know you are here! You had better surrender yourself; for if you attempt any resistance, you will perhaps get a bullet through the head."

This intimation was followed by the click of one pistol—then by that of the other: yet no answer was returned.

"What will the Burker do?" thought Bab to herself: and quick as lightning she revolved in her mind how she could possibly second any endeavour that he might perchance make for the frustration of the officers' designs.

At that self-same instant there was another wild rush of the frenzied black cat. This time it was in the passage on the ground floor; but the sounds reached the ears of those in the scullery. The door at the head of the staircase, having doubtless been disturbed by the animal, closed with violence; and the tall detective demanded, "What the deuce is that, Tom?"

"Only that cursed animal again," was the response: for all was now suddenly still once more.

Mrs. Smedley, having her nerves by this time completely strung for any abrupt or startling occurrence, quickly regained her own self-possession; and pushing the door at the bottom of the staircase, she said, "At all events we wont have the brute come rushing down here again."

The door closed and latched itself by the impulse thus given to it; and the officer who answered to the abbreviated Christian name of Tom, exclaimed sternly, "You keep quiet, ma'am! Stand away from that door—and none of your nonsense!"

"She can't escape, Tom," observed his superior: "the passage up-stairs is guarded."

All that followed was now the work of a few instants. Scarcely had the tall detective given utterance to those last words which we have recorded, when there was a rush beneath—a blow was dealt—and he disappeared as if engulfed in the dark depth from the view of his companion who was holding the light. Quick as thought, Bab Smedley threw herself with the fury of a tiger-cat upon the subordinate Tom, and precipitated him headlong down the steps. The sounds of several severely dealt blows coming up from the abyss, reached her ears; but she could see nothing—the light had fallen into the pit—she was enveloped in total darkness. Not for an instant did she lose her presence of mind: she knew where on a shelf there were the means of obtaining another light: a lucifer was struck—and at the very moment that she applied it to another candle, Barney the Burker emerged from below.

"Are they done for?" was Mrs. Smedley's rapidly put question.

"Let's see," said the Burker: and snatching the candle from her hand, he partially descended the steps—whence almost instantaneously returning, he added, "They're stunned, if not killed. And now what's to be done next?"

Bab, in a hasty whisper, gave the wretch to understand that there was an officer in the passage, and that there were others outside, watching the back premises.

"Take the light—go up quick," said the Burker, —"tell the officer he's wanted below—whimper a bit—and say as how your poor husband is took."

The woman instantaneously proceeded to obey Barney's directions; and with the light in her hand, she ascended the stairs. We should observe that from the circumstance of the doors at top and bottom being closed, the officer in the passage had heard little or nothing of what was going on below: or if indeed that suddenly executed movement on the part of Mrs. Smedley, by which Tom was thrown into the pit, had met his ears, it might naturally have been taken for the quick transient scuffle of an arrest being effected. Leaving the doors open—for she comprehended full well what the Burker's intention was—the infamous woman assumed a look of deep distress; and accosting the officer who had been appointed to keep guard upon the front door, she said in a whimpering tone, and breaking her words with an apparently convulsing sob, "It's all over! They have taken my poor dear man—and they want you down below. This is the way; there's a light where they are. Oh, dear!—oh, dear!"

The woman's part was so well played—and the whole proceeding seemed so natural—that the officer hesitated not for an instant to descend the steps to which she led him,—she herself remaining on the top to light him as he went down. The instant he reached the bottom he was felled by a blow from the Burker's club: Bab Smedley rushed down the stairs — and her ruffian accomplice, at once perceiving that the unfortunate official was stunned, dragged him into the cellar, the huge door of which he closed and bolted. Another quick examination of the subterranean showed the miscreant that the two detectives still lay motionless at the bottom of the steps; and thus far a complete triumph was gained.

But how to escape? Mrs. Smedley and the Burker had all their wits about them. They quickly ascended to the parlour, where they each partook of a hasty glass of spirits; and the Burker said, "Now put on your things without an instant's delay."

Bab rushed up to her bed-chamber: her bonnet and shawl were slipped on: her money, the few trinkets she possessed, and a packet of papers were quickly secured about her person—so that in a couple of minutes she joined the Burker again.

"Now we must make a rush for it!" he said. "You go out first, and turn to the left: I'll follow quick and go to the right. We must get out of London as quick as we can, and trust to chances whether as how we ever meet again. But first of all, have you got any blunt?"

Bab Smedley thrust three or four sovereigns into the Burker's hand; and she then issued forth from the front door of the house. Barney kept it about an inch ajar to listen, with his club in readiness to receive any other police-officials who might possibly rush in. But all was quiet; and after allowing about a minute's pause, he quitted the habitation, —closing the door behind him. Without the slightest molestation he continued his way along the street—and felt himself to be in comparative safety.

There were in reality no more officials in the front part of the Smedleys' house: but a couple were watching in the yard at the back,—little dreaming of the utter discomfiture of their comrades within. The whole affair on the part of the detectives had been entered upon so quietly, that the neighbours in the street continued utterly unsuspicious of what was going on; and thus no hue and cry was raised when the Burker stole forth. The officers, as the reader has seen, had come hither merely for the arrest of Jack Smedley: but if they could have foreseen that instead of the gold beater they would have found the Burker, they would have adopted far different precautions and would have invaded the house in a posse.

It might have been ten minutes after the Burker's escape, that the tall detective began to recover his senses: for he was only stunned—not killed—by the onslaught he had experienced. He was however much injured: for the miscreant had beaten him about the head and shoulders with his club. On thus coming to himself, the detective heard the subdued moans of his subordinate Tom; and it was yet several minutes before the two men were sufficiently recovered to drag themselves up from the pit. Then they heard a feeble knocking at the cellar-door: they opened it—and found their comrade who had been made a prisoner there, and who was nearly as much injured as themselves. The watchers from the back yard were admitted into the house; but it was only too evident that the Burker and Bab Smedley had escaped.

On the following day the subterranean was thoroughly investigated by the police: the earth at the bottom was dug up—and slight though sufficient traces were discovered to prove that the evidences of foul crimes had been concealed and well nigh obliterated there. The quick-lime, mixed with the soil, afforded a frightful indication of how the dark work had been done; and though no human remains were disinterred, there existed no doubt that more than one victim of murder had been consigned to that subterranean tomb.

CHAPTER XCII.

ATALANTA.

Turn we now to the lodgings of the Hon. Augustus Softly—the young officer to whom Madame Angelique, on breaking up her establishment, so generously bequeathed Mademoiselle Armantine.

Very beautiful was the French girl—yet far from being so little frail as the milliner had chosen to represent her. Of a fascinating style of loveliness—with all the first freshness of youth sufficiently well preserved—and indeed still youthful, for she was not yet twenty-two—Armantine was fully calculated to make a powerful impression on such a mind as that of Mr Softly. Her manners were captivating: she had all those little bewitching arts which specially characterise the females of the nation to which she belonged: she was far from deficient in accomplishments—she could draw, play, and sing; and as for dancing, she was a veritable proficient in the art. Thus altogether the Hon. Augustus Softly found her a very enchanting mistress.

Several days had elapsed since the commencement of his acquaintance with Armantine: and one afternoon, at about two o'clock, she arrived at his lodgings, according to an appointment made on the previous day. He purposed to regale her with a champagne luncheon; and he had risen at least an hour earlier than usual for the purpose. The apartment where he received her was decorated in true bachelor-fashion: foils and boxing-gloves, hunting whips and firearms, fishing-tackle and other accessories to field sports, were scattered about—though Mr. Softly had never angled but once in his life, on which occasion after a whole day's fishing he caught a minnow—he was an execrable shot—and as for hunting, he had not sufficient courage to follow the hounds. But he was nevertheless fond of boasting of his accomplishments and his feats in all these respects; and he considered it manly to have the articles above enumerated scattered about his apartments.

Mademoiselle Armantine, having flung off her bonnet and shawl, sate down at table; and the champagne soon led to very lively discourse.

"My dear girl," said Softly, after some conversation on general topics, "I ought to consider myself exceedingly fortunate that you should prefer me to the Duke of Marchmont."

"Ah! my dear Augustus," replied the young lady, fixing her eyes tenderly upon him; "to see you at parade was perfectly irresistible. But Madame Angelique told you all about it?"

"Yes: and I certainly felt myself highly flattered. But don't be offended, my dear Armantine," continued Mr. Softly: "I only just want to ask one little question—and that is, did you really never have a lover—you know what I mean—before the Duke?"

"Oh, never! never!" exclaimed the French girl, with so much readiness that Mr. Softly was at once convinced of her sincerity.

"And your father——"

"Ah, don't speak of him!" suddenly interrupted Armantine, with a real though transient feeling of remorse.

"Do tell me," said the young gentleman, "something about your earlier life. Drink another glass of champagne—let us laugh and be as gay as possible."

"Well, we will," said Armantine. "Now listen while I tell you a little tale——"

"Is it a true one?" asked Softly.

"You shall judge for yourself. About five years ago," continued Armantine, "a young French lady, endowed with tolerable accomplishments, and about as good looking as I am——"

"In that case she was an angel," cried the lieutenant of the Guards.

"She was an angel, then—since you will have it so," resumed Armantine, laughing so as to display her pearly teeth. "Well, this angel was consigned to a convent——"

"I recollect that Madame Angelique——"

"Now, do be silent!—pray don't interrupt me!"—and Armantine tapped his cheek with her small snowy white hand. "The young lady I speak of was consigned to a convent—which she relished about as much as you would fancy bread and water for your dinner. Well, she had not been many weeks there when she escaped; and not daring to return home, sped to Paris. She knew not exactly how to get her living; and finding it inconvenient to starve—as well as being little disposed to plunge headlong into improper courses——You see, my dear Augustus, it is a very moral tale——"

"But don't let it get *too* serious," interjected Softly.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Armantine, with another smile: "it is about to take a very lively turn. Being an accomplished dancer, the young lady went boldly to the Opera——not very boldly though—I mean that the act was bold to go there at all: for she was all modesty and confusion. However, she inquired for the ballet-master, and besought employment. He desired her to afford him a specimen of her abilities; and I suppose that as in consequence of her timidity she acquitted herself with some degree of awkwardness, he chucked her under the chin—no doubt for the purpose of encouraging her. She boxed his ears in return. For a moment he appeared as if about to be desperately angry: but altering his mind he burst out into a hearty laugh—for he was a very good-natured man. This little incident gave the young lady spirits; and then she acquitted herself so well that he resolved to prepare her for the ballet. Then she went through a course of training: her progress was incredible—her proficiency was soon complete. The ballet-master treated her with kindness—protected her from insult—and appeared to have conceived a paternal affection for the young lady after the repulse which his first amatory overture had received. At length the day came when she was to make her appearance in public; and every wall in Paris was covered with immense posters, announcing the intended *debut* of Mademoiselle Atalanta—for that was the name which the exquisite imagination of the ballet-master bestowed upon her."

"And a very pretty name too!" observed Softly: "but of course not so captivating as Armantine. Pray proceed."

"Atalanta's triumph was immense," continued the French girl; "and the reviews on the following day spoke of her as a perfect miracle in the Terpsichorean sphere. It may perhaps be as well to observe that out of the dozen principal *critiques* the ballet-master himself wrote seven, all in different strains of eulogy; and the remaining five were penned by the reviewers immediately after the champagne-supper which the Director of the Opera gave to the gentlemen of the press in the Green-room. But all this apart, Atalanta's triumph was really immense. She appeared as a sylph amongst a mass of clouds: she had wings at her back—flowers in her hair; and whatsoever beauties of form she possessed were developed by the gauzy drapery. The enthusiasm her appearance excited, no doubt inspired her to put forth all her powers; and subsequent *critiques*—which were *not* penned by the friendly ballet-master, and *not* written under the influence of the Director's champagne—pronounced her style of dancing to be a perfect combination of all the elegancies and graces pertaining to the art."

"The ravishing creature!" ejaculated Softly. "But I fancy I see in this lovely embodiment of graces and elegancies——"

"Pray anticipate nothing!" interjected Armantine, again tapping her foolish young lover's cheek in a playful manner. "You may easily suppose that she had a great many overtures, and was exposed to many temptations—some of which, when rejected, changed into persecution. And now I come to that part which constitutes my motive for telling you this tale. Amongst the noblemen and gentlemen—foreign as well as French—who obtained admittance behind the scenes and were allowed the *entrée* of the Green-room, was a fierce military-looking Englishman, some forty years of age, who made the most brilliant overtures to Mademoiselle Atalanta: but, along with the rest, he experienced a decisive refusal. He became the most persevering of her persecutors. He had her carried off to a lonely house on the outskirts of Paris: but thence she escaped. A second time was she carried off; and on this occasion to a house of infamy, where the unprincipled Englishman vowed that if she did not submit by fair means, violence should be used, and all Paris should know next day that Atalanta, the supposed paragon of virtue, had passed the night there. She however escaped a second time; the police were informed of the outrage—and the Englishman was ordered to leave Paris. His infatuation took a phase by no means uncommon: it turned from love to hate—and he secretly set himself to work to find out who Mademoiselle Atalanta really was. He succeeded: he communicated with her family; and for the third time was she carried off when leaving the opera—but on this occasion by her father and brother. She was taken back to her convent. This was what the Englishman desired; and he found means of causing a letter to be conveyed to her, intimating that if she would consent to fly with him, he would effect her escape. She showed the letter to the Superior: it was conveyed to the police—and the Englishman was turned out of France. Circumstances recently brought Atalanta to London. This very day she has encountered the Englishman; and he has threatened her with his implacable vengeance unless she chooses to place herself under his protection."

"And the charming Atalanta," exclaimed Softly, "is, as I all along suspected, the equally charming Armantine?"

"Put all the *charmings* out of the question," responded the young lady, with a smile, "and you are right. Now, my dear Augustus, you are acquainted with one episode in my life."

"Yes—and Madame Angelique told me that your father is a Marquis," he immediately added.

"Ah! pray do not speak of him," murmured Armantine. "If I were married, it would indeed be very, very different!"

"And Madame Angelique," pursued Softly, "helped the Duke of Marchmont to carry you off from the convent two or three months back."

"If you see Marchmont," was the wily French girl's guarded response, "he will tell you all about it."

"I saw him just now," rejoined Softly.

"Ah, indeed!" ejaculated Armantine quickly.

"Yes—he called upon me for a few minutes," rejoined the Hon. Augustus Softly, "about half-an-hour before you came in. To tell you the truth—being rather proud of my conquest, I spoke of it to the Duke; and he said enough to confirm Madame Angelique's tale. But about this Englishman of your's —— what is his name?"

"His name?—Captain Cartwright," responded Armantine: and then she added with a visible shudder, "And, Oh! he is so terribly ferocious—such a desperate man! I am sure I should faint if he made his appearance to molest me!"

"Molest you, my dear girl?" exclaimed Mr. Softly, assuming a very valorous look: "not while I am here to defend you! No matter whether swords or pistols—egad! I would teach him a lesson which he should not forget!"

Armantine watched her lover narrowly, but without seeming to do so, as he thus spoke; and she was shrewd and penetrating enough to discover that beneath his parade of magnanimity there was a real cowardice. In truth the Hon. Augustus Softly was as chicken-hearted a young gentleman as ever by such paltriness of disposition disgraced the British uniform. Let the reader recollect that we are by no means drawing him as a type of British officers generally—nor of those of the Guards especially. In his foppery, his conceit, his extravagance, and his dissipated habits, he might certainly be taken as the representative of a large class of military men bearing commissions: but in the cowardice of his nature he constituted an exception.

"Come," said Armantine, suddenly assuming a most lively air, "we will not talk any more about this odious captain. The champagne ought to put us in good spirits. Come, sing me a song!"

"I never sang in my life, my dear girl," replied Softly. "The Guards, you know, don't sing."

"Well, but we must do something to amuse ourselves," exclaimed Armantine, now exhibiting all the gaiety and sprightliness that characterise the women of the country to which she belonged. "Ah! there is your uniform! I have a very great mind to try it on and see how it fits me."

"Do!" exclaimed Softly. "Capital idea!—delicious, 'pon my honour!"

Armantine sprang from her seat, laughing merrily; and first of all she put on the Hon. Augustus Softly's cap with the gold band round it. She looked at herself in the glass; and as the cap rested above the long flowing glossy hair, and the countenance wore an expression of mischievous archness, Mademoiselle Armantine looked quite charming. Softly was enraptured: he considered the whole proceeding exquisite; and any one might indeed have envied him the facility with which he was amused.

"Now for the coat!" exclaimed Armantine: and she was about to put it on.

"What! over your dress?" said Augustus.

"You wicked fellow, what would you have me do?" and she tapped him playfully on the cheek. "Surely it will fit me as it is? You are not so very stout—neither am I."

Thus speaking, and laughing merrily all the while, Armantine put on the red coat: but she could not fasten it across her bosom. Mr. Softly volunteered his aid; and as he availed himself of the opportunity to snatch divers little licences with his beautiful mistress, the playful tapping of the cheek was renewed, accompanied by peals of laughter more hilarious than ever. But all of a sudden Armantine's countenance underwent a striking change; a faint shriek burst from her lips; and on the Hon. Augustus Softly turning hastily round in the direction to which her eyes were looking, he started on beholding the cause of her affright.

A very fierce-looking gentleman was standing upon the threshold, holding the door half-open, and surveying the scene. He was tall, and somewhat stoutly built,—his form being indicative of great strength; while the expression of his countenance denoted a veritable fire-eater. He was of the middle age—perhaps a trifle past it; and had grey whiskers and moustaches,—the latter considerably enhancing the fierceness of his look. His brows, naturally thick and overhanging, were now much corrugated, as if with the infuriate feelings which were pent up in his soul, but seeking to have a vent, and determined to find one too. He wore a sort of semi-military apparel, of a somewhat antiquated and well-nigh exploded fashion. A surtout coat, all frogged and braided over the breast, and fastening with hooks and eyes, fitted tight to his strongly built person, and was closed up to the throat. He had grey trousers, with red stripes; and on his head was a species of foraging-cap. He wore buckskin gloves; and had altogether the air of a military man of the old school.

Mr. Softly's fears at once suggested that Armantine's terror could have been created by nothing but the appearance of Captain Cartwright—and that therefore the formidable Captain Cartwright this fierce-looking individual must assuredly be.

"Save me from him, my dear Augustus!" said Armantine, flinging her arms about the neck of her lover, and clinging to him as if in the very frenzy of terror.

"Oh—yes—yes! I'll—I'll save you, my dear," stammered the young Guardsman, with a very pale countenance. "But perhaps the gentleman—the Captain, I mean—for I suppose it *is* Captain Cartwright to whom I have the honour of speaking—will be so good as to explain——"

"Explain, sir?" ejaculated the fierce-looking individual, now seeming ten thousand times more fierce than at first: "I never explain!—unless it is with such things as these:" and he pointed towards a sword and a pistol-case which lay upon a side table.

"Perhaps, sir," said Mr. Softly, plucking up all the courage he could possibly call to his aid in order to meet the present crisis, "if you were to do me the honour to—to sit down—and—and take a glass of wine——"

"My demeanour here, sir," interrupted the Captain, closing the door violently behind him, "depends entirely on the answers I receive to a few questions I am going to put. In that young lady, sir, I entertain a very deep interest——"

"Don't for heaven's sake, irritate him, my dearest Augustus!" whispered Armantine, as with countenance averted from Captain Cartwright she tremblingly clung to her lover's arm.

"A very deep interest," continued the fierce-looking intruder; "and moreover I have her father's authority for taking any step that may seem good to me according to circumstances."

"Ah, my poor father!" murmured Armantine. "But pray, my dear Augustus, do not—do not anger this dreadful man—or he will kill us both outright!"

"I may at one time have entertained a tender sentiment for that young lady," continued Captain Cartwright; "but circumstances have occurred to alter that feeling—and now it is a fraternal or paternal regard that I experience for her. I have traced her hither. If you tell me, Mr. Softly, that she is your wife, I shall be satisfied—I shall rejoice—I shall fill a bumper of champagne——and what is more, I shall drink it!"

Here, as if to render his words all the more impressive, Captain Cartwright struck the table such a violent blow with his clenched fist that Mr. Softly shuddered to the innermost confines of his being; while his mistress whispered in a hastier and more tremulous tone than ever, "He is mad! he is desperate! For heaven's sake say anything—everything to pacify him! I know all your courage, my dear Augustus: but think what a dreadful thing it would be for me if he stretched you weltering in your blood at my feet!"

At this horrible idea poor Softly gave vent to a low moan; and he trembled so perceptibly that the reader may marvel how it was that Armantine could whisperingly add, "For both our sakes restrain this dreadful ardour of your's!—curb your fiery temper!—tell him everything—promise him everything—or he will massacre us!"

Meanwhile Captain Cartwright, having dealt that terribly energetic thump upon the table, took three or four strides to and fro in the apartment as if to compose his excited feeling: but if this were his object, the aim was not reached—for it was with the fiercest possible expression of countenance that he once more accosted the miserable Augustus Softly.

"Yes, sir," continued the fire-eater, "if that young lady is your wife, I shall be happy—I shall rejoice: I shall be enabled to speed to her father with the agreeable intelligence. But if, sir, on the other hand"—and here Captain Cartwright ground his teeth as if with an uncontrollable fury at the bare idea he was about to explain,—"if, sir, you cannot look me frankly in the face and say that she is here without discredit or dishonour to herself, I shall be compelled, sir—painful though the alternative be—to embrue my hands in the blood of a fellow-creature!"

Having given vent to this frightful threat, Captain Cartwright did not dash his clenched fist upon the table—but he stalked straight up to where the young officer's sword lay, and he deliberately drew the weapon from its sheath.

"Just heaven, he will murder us!" whispered Armantine, as if in a dying voice. "For my sake—for both our sakes—tell him I am your wife!"

"But, my dear girl——"

"Did you speak, sir?" demanded the officer, turning round upon Softly with such fierce abruptness that the unfortunate young gentleman felt his blood all curdling in his veins, his teeth chattering, and his limbs trembling. "Did you speak, sir, I ask?—did you give me an answer to my question? Yes or no—is that lady your wife?"

"Ye-e-e-s," replied Augustus, in such a terrible state of bewilderment that he scarcely knew what he was saying.

"Yes?" exclaimed Cartwright. "Speak it out more plainly!"

"For heaven's sake," whispered Armantine, "dearest Augustus——"

"Yes, she is my wife!" said the young officer, feeling as if by the assertion his life was suddenly saved.

"Then look up, Armantine — and be not abashed!" exclaimed Cartwright. "Never mind this masquerading nonsense—dressing yourself up in your husband's regimentals! New-married people are as silly as lovers after all! Mr. Softly, you are a man of honour—I am proud, sir, to make your acquaintance. There is my hand."

While thus speaking, the terrible captain had returned the sword to its sheath; and hastily drawing off his buckskin glove, he presented his hand to Softly. The young gentleman took it; and now Mademoiselle Armantine ventured to look round upon the fierce Captain.

"Do not be afraid of me any longer," he said, assuming a milder tone and look. "Here's my hand for *you* also—and now I can communicate joyous tidings to your father. But, Ah! I forget something! The marriage certificate? I must see it—I must satisfy myself before I compromise my word in communicating with your father."

"Tell him you have left it elsewhere," hastily whispered Armantine. "Tell him anything—for heaven's sake do! His look is already changing."

"The marriage certificate, sir?" said Captain Cartwright sternly.

"The certificate? Oh ye-e-e-s," stammered the Hon. Augustus Softly. "It's all right—it's—it's at a friend's of mine—where we had the wedding-breakfast——ye-e-e-s, that's it."

"Good!" exclaimed Captain Cartwright: "you are a man of honour in every respect—and it rejoices me that I can be proud of your friendship instead of having to wreak a frightful vengeance upon you. Here's to both your healths!"

Thus speaking, the now appeased fire-eater filled himself a glass of champagne, and poured the contents down that throat from which such terrible menaces had recently come forth.

"Mr. Softly," he continued, "I must see this certificate. I can say nothing to Armantine's father until I have received indisputable evidence that she *is* your wife. To-morrow I am engaged to fight a duel in the morning—to trounce a rascal in the afternoon—and to break a fellow's head at my Club in the evening. But the day after, sir, at two o'clock punctually, I shall be here. I don't like using threats, sir,"—and here the Captain looked most overpoweringly fierce: "but if the certificate is not forthcoming, I shall be compelled, sir—disagreeably compelled—to inflict such a chastisement on you——"

"Oh, Captain Cartwright!" exclaimed Armantine, as if in an agony of terror: "spare these dreadful threats!—the certificate will be forthcoming! Will it not, dear Augustus?"—and she looked appealingly at her paramour.

"Ye-e-e-s—Oh! yes," responded the miserable Softly, who again felt that all the blood was curdling in his veins and that his hair was standing on end.

"Good!" exclaimed the Captain. "The day after to-morrow at two o'clock I shall be here!"

He then stalked out of the room, closing the door violently behind him; and the miserable Mr. Augustus Softly sank with a hollow groan into an arm-chair. He looked the very picture of wretchedness: but Armantine filled him a glass of wine—seated herself on his knee—wound her arm about his neck—and plied all her most witching cajoleries—lavished too all the most tender caresses, with such effect that the young gentleman rallied sufficiently to envisage his position and discuss it within himself.

What was to be done? To appeal to a magistrate for protection against the fire-eater, would be virtually to avow a dastard inability to protect himself. To run away from London at a moment when he knew he could not procure leave of absence from his regiment, would be to renounce his commission—and when the reason should be known, to be cut by everybody as a coward. Yet the certificate *must* be forthcoming! Would the date of it matter so long as it was displayed? Certainly not. Then the only alternative which could be adopted, was the marriage of the Hon. Augustus Softly with Mademoiselle Armantine by special licence on the morrow.

All these reflections passed through Mr. Softly's brain, as Armantine doffed the red coat and the cap. He looked at her. She was exquisitely shaped—her countenance was beautiful. But then, to marry one's mistress! Still it was better than to be sacrificed to the vengeance of a blood-thirsty fire-eater; and Mr. Softly came to the conclusion that it was the best course he could possibly adopt. Armantine fully comprehended all that was passing in his mind: she lavished her caresses upon him—she declared how much she loved him—she said everything to gratify his vanity and minister to his pride—she protested that she was ready and willing to make any sacrifice to ensure his happiness—she would even flee from the country, though her own heart should break—but she dreaded the vengeance of the terrible Cartwright on account of her dear Augustus!

Could Mr. Softly resist all this? Impossible! He drank glass after glass of champagne—his blood was heated with the wine and with Armantine's seductive caresses—he likewise experienced an awful horror of Captain Cartwright; and thus, amidst the strange and unnatural confusion of his feelings and bewilderment of his thoughts, he decided on securing the charmer as his wife, and thereby averting the hideous vengeance of the fire-eater.

CHAPTER XCIII.

THE OLD LORD AND HIS MISTRESS.

The scene now changes to the sumptuously furnished house which Lord Wenham had hired for the accommodation of his beautiful Eglantine—who was passed off on him as the immaculate niece of the not very immaculate Madame Angelique. The reader will not have forgotten that his lordship was an octogenarian, with bowed form, wrinkled face, an absence of teeth, a continuous hacking cough, and a mumbling stammering mode of speech. Well nigh in his dotage, he had placed implicit confidence in the specious tale of Eglantine's virtue, and in the specious manner in which the young lady had played her part towards her "wicked aunt." Immensely rich, and a widower, the antiquated nobleman thought that he had a perfect right to minister to his own pleasures; and he had not therefore hesitated to form this most expensive connexion.

It was in the forenoon on the day following the incidents which we have related in the preceding chapter; and if we peep into an exquisitely furnished boudoir at Miss Eglantine's new abode, we shall find the young lady and her ancient protector seated at breakfast. His lordship had passed the night at the house; and he was completely infatuated, like an old dotard as he was, with his beautiful mistress. We should observe that there had been all the shyness and prudery of a veritable virgin bride in the first instance; and now that some days had elapsed since the connexion began, Eglantine appeared to entertain so lively a sense of the old lord's generosity and kindness, that she behaved as if she already esteemed and could soon love him.

They were seated, as we have said, at breakfast,—Eglantine in a charming *déshabillé* — Lord Wenham in a dressing-gown and black velvet skull-cap. The contrast was immense—and afforded a striking illustration of the varieties of appearance which human beings may present to the view,—how one may be formed to fascinate and another to disgust—how grace, elegance, and loveliness may belong to youth, and how loathsome ugliness may characterize old age. And yet that old lord was infatuated enough to hug the belief that he had already rendered himself agreeable to Eglantine—that she esteemed him—and that she would soon love him. And he moreover already doted upon her: he would sooner have parted with title and wealth than have separated from her. He was jealous too—as jealous as he could be ——not because she had given him any reason for the sentiment, nor because he was deficient in conceit of his own merits—but because it is in the nature of all men to be thus jealous of young wives, and still more of young mistresses.

"My dear girl," he presently said, after having contemplated her for two or three minutes,—"ugh! ugh! this dreadful cough of mine!——you seem pensive to-day? Tell me, my sweet girl—ugh! ugh! if it weren't for this horrible cough I should feel quite young again!—But tell me, what it is that makes you look so pensive?"

"Pensive—am I pensive?" ejaculated Eglantine, as if suddenly starting up from a reverie; "I am sure I did not think I was! And yet——"

"Ugh! ugh!—and yet——ugh! ugh!—this dreadful cough! But why, my dear, did you qualify your assurance? Pray be candid with me—ugh! ugh! If there is anything you want——ugh! ugh!——anything more I can do to ensure your happiness——"

"Your lordship has already done so much for me," responded Eglantine, "as to leave not a single wish unfulfiled. Indeed, I had never formed any such wishes at all—for I did not foresee what my fate was to be!"—and as Eglantine thus spoke in a tremulous voice, she suffered her eyelids to droop—her air became pensive again—and then she hastily passed her kerchief across her brow, as if wiping away tears.

"Come, come, my dear girl," said the old nobleman, "what—what—ugh! ugh!—perdition take this cough of mine!—ugh! ugh!—what, what is it that makes you so melancholy?"

"To be candid with you, my lord," answered Eglantine, suddenly looking up with an air of the most artless sincerity into the countenance of her aged protector, "I have been thinking what my uncle would say to me if he knew what I had done—or what he would do to my aunt if he learnt to what she has brought me?"

"Your uncle—ugh! Your aunt—ugh! ugh!" stammered and coughed Lord Wenham. "I never knew that there was a *Monsieur* Angelique—I always thought that Madame was either a widow —or at least passed as such. Tell me, my dear—ugh! ugh! ugh!—this cough will be the death of me—ugh! ugh!"

"Madame Angelique is a widow," explained Eglantine: "but nevertheless I have an uncle. I will tell you how it is. Madame Angelique's sister married an English gentleman: I am the issue of that union. My parents are dead, as your lordship has already been told; and I was taken at their death into the care of a distant relative. She also died; and then my aunt Angelique took care of me. My late father's brother has for a long time been abroad—first in the army—then holding a high situation in the civil service of India; and he is shortly to return home—even if he be not at this moment in England. That is the uncle, my dear lord," added Eglantine, with a profound sigh, "whom I dread so much."

"Is he a very stern man—ugh! ugh!—is he so very formidable?" asked Lord Wenham: and then he was seized with such a violent fit of coughing that it was a wonder he was not shaken into the next world.

"I have not seen him since I was about ten or eleven years old," replied Eglantine, when the fit of coughing was over; "and then my uncle came on a year's leave to England for the benefit of his health. Oh! I never can forget that countenance of his—so stern—so threatening—so fierce! Do not, my dear lord, judge all the other members of my family by my aunt Angelique—nor by what I myself have become."

"Nonsense, nonsense, my dear!" ejaculated Wenham: "don't talk in this way of yourself. You seem to think—ugh! ugh!—that you have done something most dreadfully bad by living with me. Nothing of the sort—ugh! ugh! ugh! this cough—ugh! ugh!—of mine! It is not as if you had been a wild giddy girl, with a number of lovers—or as if you had been one of the regular inmates of Madame Angelique's establishment. But innocent—ugh! ugh!—and virtuous—ugh! ugh!—as you were——"

"Ah! still, my lord," said Eglantine, with another profound sigh, "I have fallen—I feel it—and how can I look my uncle in the face, should he find me out on his return to England?"

"But why need he find you out?" inquired the old nobleman: "why—ugh! ugh!—should he discover—ugh! ugh!—where you are?"

"How can it possibly be avoided?" asked Eglantine. "He will come to London—he is unmarried—childless—and I believe well off. He will ask for his young relative—he will not submit to the evasions and equivocations which my aunt Angelique is sure to use. He is terribly violent—resolutely determined—fierce almost to savageness. He is persevering too; and if he do not extort from Madame Angelique a confession of all that has occurred, he will leave no stone unturned in order to find me out."

"Ugh! ugh!—my dear—then we must hide you," said the old nobleman: and as his voice abruptly rose from its wonted mumbling and stammering into a positive shriek, he yelled forth, "I couldn't part from you!—they shan't tear you from me! they shan't tear you from me!"

"Oh, how kind and good your lordship is!" murmured Eglantine, apparently melted to tears: and starting from her seat, she threw her arms round the old dotard's neck, lavishing caresses upon him.

"You do love me a *leetle* bit?" said Wenham, looking up into her face with gloating eyes, and grinning like an ancient goat.

"Ah! until now I esteemed you," responded Eglantine: "but at present I feel—yes, I feel that I love you!"—then gliding back to her seat, she flung upon her old protector a look that seemed to vibrate with mingled tenderness and gratitude.

"You are a good girl—ugh! ugh!—a very good girl," said the nobleman; "and we will go out presently in the carriage to the splendid shawl-shop in Regent-street—where—ugh! ugh!—you shall choose whatever you like."

"Ah, my dear lord," exclaimed Eglantine, "now you will understand the impossibility of keeping myself concealed from this terrible uncle of mine, whenever he begins to search for me. How can I remain in-doors all day? how can I debar myself the pleasure of accompanying you in your drives? I care not for society or gaiety: with you I can be happy:—but complete loneliness and seclusion I can not endure! My uncle must sooner or later find me out——"

At this moment the door opened; and a shriek pealed from Eglantine's lips. Lord Wenham at first looked aghast: but on perceiving in which direction the eyes of his young mistress were bent, he turned himself round in his chair, and beheld a formidable-looking personage advancing into the room. We may save ourselves the trouble of much description, by declaring at once that the intruder was none other than Captain Cartwright: but on the present occasion he was dressed in plain clothes. Scarcely less fierce however was his aspect than on the preceding day when he presented himself to the Hon. Augustus Softly and Mademoiselle Armantine. His countenance was stern and implacable; and on advancing into the room, he banged the door with such terrific violence that it made the old lord shudder and quake from head to foot with a startled sensation that was immediately followed by a fit of coughing which lasted for several minutes.

Meanwhile Eglantine had covered her face with her hands: and Captain Cartwright, with arms folded across his chest, stood surveying her with the sternest severity.

"And is it thus," he said, "that I find my niece —the pensioned mistress of a nobleman! I came to England for the purpose of giving you a happy home, and making you the heiress of my wealth: I had buoyed myself up with a thousand fond hopes, —hopes of happiness in my declining years, in the society of a niece who would be unto me as a daughter, and for whom I should find an eligible husband. But all these hopes are destroyed—and my deceased brother's daughter has dishonoured the name of Cartwright—that name which never was dishonoured before!"

"Spare me, dear uncle—spare me!" exclaimed Eglantine, flinging herself with every appearance of the wildest grief at Captain Cartwright's feet. "His lordship is very kind to me——"

"Kind to you, Eglantine?" ejaculated the Captain scornfully: "what means such kindness as this?"

"Sir," interrupted the old nobleman, "I—I—ugh! ugh!—would have you know that I—I—ugh! ugh!—am incapable of treating your niece otherwise than—ugh! ugh!—with kindness."

"It is something in your favour, my lord," answered Captain Cartwright sternly; "but still it will not save you from the chastisement I am bound to inflict upon the seducer of my niece."

"Oh, no do not touch him! do not injure a hair of his head!" exclaimed Eglantine, starting to her feet and bounding towards the old nobleman, around whose neck her arms were thrown.

"You are a good girl, my dear—ugh! ugh!—you are a good girl," mumbled Wenham. "There! there! don't weep—don't take on so!—sit down, my love—ugh! ugh!—and your uncle will presently grow calmer."

Eglantine retired to her chair: but Captain Cartwright remained standing, his arms still folded—his looks still sternly severe.

"Lord Wenham," he said, "listen to the few words which I have to address unto you. A beloved brother on his death-bed bequeathed his child to my care. I undertook the charge, vowing to fulfil it affectionately and honourably. My avocations recalled me to India; and I left my niece in the care of an elderly female relative in whom I could confide. She paid the debt of nature some little while back; and then Eglantine, after an interval passed with a friend, went under the protection of my sister-in-law Madame Angelique. And such protection it has been!—good heavens, such protection! In a word, my hopes are blighted—and that niece whom to her father on his death-bed I swore to protect and befriend, is a fallen creature——and *you*, my lord, are her seducer!"

"But she loves me—ugh! ugh!" shrieked forth Wenham, in that same shrill tone to which his voice had ere now risen; "and you shan't part us! —ugh! ugh!——you shan't part us!"

"Oh, uncle! uncle!" murmured the weeping Eglantine, "pray be not so cruel unto me—Oh! be not cruel unto me!"

"Cruel, niece?" ejaculated Captain Cartwright: "it is you that have been cruel to the memory of your parents—to me—aye, and unto yourself! But I must tear you hence—from this house of infamy!—you must go with me—and on *you*, my lord, will I inflict such vengeance as the seducer deserves. Not even your years—much less your rank and wealth shall protect you! You are bound to give me satisfaction for the seduction of my niece. A friend of mine will wait upon you presently; and if you refuse, I swear that I will horsewhip you publicly——not a horsewhipping for me[illegible]—not a simple laying of the whip upon you[illegible]!—but such a chastisement as shall bring you [illegible] hair's-breadth of the grave!"

A shriek [illegible]led from Eglantine's lips: again she flung herself at the Captain's feet—again she implored his mercy. But fiercely seizing her by the wrist, he compelled her to rise; and then, as he tossed her from him, she sank back sobbing convulsively into her chair. Meanwhile the old nobleman had been thrown into such a nervous state of excitement by the dread of losing his beautiful mistress, and by the terrific threats of personal chastisement which the fierce Captain had flung out, that he was almost suffocated and strangled by another fit of coughing.

"If on my return to England," resumed Captain Cartwright, now addressing Eglantine with mournfulness rather than bitterness perceptible in his tone, "I had found you the honoured wedded wife of this nobleman, or of any other man of station or character, joy would have filled my heart. I should have blessed you—I should have thought with a holy comfort of the manner in which I had fulfilled my vow to your deceased parents: I should not have felt as if I myself were a guilty and perjured being in contemplating the memory of your father. But instead of hailing you as a wife, I find you living in gilded infamy——Oh, it is terrible to think of! and there is no vengeance, my lord, too deadly to be wreaked on you as this orphan girl's seducer!"

"But—but," said the nobleman, quivering with nervousness, and shaken by his hacking cough,—"but—but—ugh! ugh!—is there no means by which this matter can be settled? I—I will place a very large—ugh! ugh!—sum of money in Eglantine's name ——"

"My lord," interrupted Captain Cartwright sternly, "this is adding insult to injury! What?—think you that the loss of her honour is to be compensated for by gold? Come, Eglantine—come directly—I insist upon it!"

"She shan't go!" screeched forth the old nobleman, who looked as if he were goaded almost to frenzy: "she shan't go!"

"We shall see, my lord," answered Cartwright coldly. "Eglantine is under age—I am her natural protector and her guardian: if she refuse to accompany me of her own free will, I must put force into requisition. Come, girl, I say—come!"

"But my dear sir—ugh! ugh!—I love her!" exclaimed Lord Wenham. "She is the only good girl I ever knew!—the only one that—ugh! ugh!—did not give herself airs: and therefore—ugh! ugh!"

"But think you, my lord," demanded the Captain, "that because you love her, I will leave her here as your pensioned mistress? Heaven forbid! Come, girl—come!"

"Well, well," muttered Lord Wenham, "I suppose it must be—ugh! ugh!—it must be! Captain Cartwright—ugh! ugh!——But what will the world think? Hang the world!—ugh! ugh! I should not be the first nobleman that—ugh! ugh!——Besides, how many have married actresses? And then too, no one need know—ugh! ugh!—that Eglantine lived with me first of all. It has only been a matter of a few days. Captain Cartwright, ahem!—ugh! ugh!—I think—ahem!—ugh!—hah!—ahem!—ugh! ugh!"

Thus, what with sometimes muttering to himself—sometimes speaking loud enough to be heard—and coughing incessantly from first to last—the old dotard conveyed an idea of what was passing in his mind.

"You think *what*, my lord?" demanded Cartwright, as Wenham suddenly stopped short.

"I think, Captain—ugh! ugh!" answered the nobleman, "that this little matter—ahem!—hah!—little matter may be perhaps arranged—ugh! ugh!—to the satisfaction of us all. Eglantine is a good girl—and—and—ugh! ugh!—will I am sure make a—ahem!—hah!—make a—you know—ugh!—a very good wife."

A wild cry of joy thrilled from Eglantine's lips as she flew towards the old nobleman; and again flinging her arms about his neck, she lavished upon him the tenderest and most endearing caresses.

"My lord," said Captain Cartwright, "you are now performing the part of an honourable man. I esteem and respect you——and I feel convinced that my beloved niece *will* make you a most excellent wife. You will have the goodness to give me your solemn written undertaking that the marriage shall be solemnized by special license to-morrow—though under circumstances of as much privacy as possible, so that it may not be known to the world that Eglantine lived under your protection as a mistress before she became a wife. Give me this undertaking, my lord—and I will depart for the present—I will not separate you—I will leave you to the discussion of such preliminaries as may be necessary for all that is to take place."

The old dotard—labouring under a mortal terror of the fierce Captain Cartwright, and equally influenced, though in another sense, by the tender caresses which Eglantine was lavishing upon him—hesitated not to give the written undertaking which the fire-eater demanded.

CHAPTER XCIV.

THE INDIAN COMMISSIONERS.

THE scene once more changes to Shrubbery Villa—the residence of the Princess Indora in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill and Bayswater. The Princess was seated alone in that exquisitely furnished apartment where we found her on the first occasion that she was introduced to our readers. It was at the back of the drawing-room on the first-floor; and the style of its appointments was altogether oriental. The lamp suspended to the ceiling, shed its soft roseate light through the transparent medium of a pink-tinted globe of glass; and the ottomans, with their red velvet cushions—the crimson draperies, with their massive gold fringes—and the carpet of corresponding dyes, appeared to borrow deeper and richer hues from that flood of lustre.

The Princess Indora was seated upon one of the ottomans; and she was arrayed in the most becoming oriental garb. A caftan of purple velvet, exquisitely embroidered, and brilliant with gems, set off the fine symmetry of her shape to admirable advantage. Confined at the throat and at the waist, the interval that was left open revealed the rounded contours of the gorgeous bust through the gauzy and almost transparent *chemisette*. She wore satin trousers of an azure colour, embroidered, and trimmed with the richest lace. Made full in the eastern style, they ballooned down to the ankles, where they were tied: the ankles themselves were bare—and the feet were thrust into morocco slippers of a purple colour ornamented with pearls. According to her custom, the Princess wore no corset: nor indeed were any artificial means of support or compression requisite for a form so superbly modelled, and the rich contours of which sustained themselves as nature intended and as if they were the sculptured delineations of a statue.

Be it recollected that the complexion of the Princess Indora was not of gipsy swarthiness, although it was of eastern duskiness; and it differed from that of the brunette of our western clime, inasmuch as it was of a clear pale brown. We have said too—but we may repeat it here—that the skin had all that fine-grained appearance and that animated polish which seemed to indicate that so far from the first freshness of youth being lost, it still adhered, unmarred and unimpaired, to a matured and voluptuous womanhood. The rich warm blood of her eastern origin mantled with carnation tint upon the cheeks—gradually softening away until imperceptibly blending with the pale brown purity of the general complexion. To gaze upon the Princess Indora—to observe those masses of luxuriantly flowing hair, dark as night, without wave or curl except at the extremities, but all as soft as silk—that faultless profile, with the straight nose, the short upper lip, and the delicately rounded chin—those coal-black eyes, full of a languishing lustre, and curtained at times by the richest ebon fringes that ever constituted a veil which woman could at pleasure draw over her thoughts—to pass on from that countenance of magnificent beauty, and suffer the eye to wander along the line of the throat, till it joined the neck where the bust expanded into such grandly rounded and voluptuously swelling contours—to travel still onward with the gaze, and follow the sweeping outlines of the arms, bare to the shoulders, and modelled with robustness and yet to the most admirable symmetry—to pursue the contemplation to the feet, which were long and shapely, with high insteps—to complete this survey of the living, glowing, animated picture, would be to feast the eyes with one of the most charming and magnificent creations that ever belonged to the sphere of the female sex.

Such indeed was the Princess Indora, who had now nearly completed her thirty-first year. Ordinarily with eastern women, they are at that age on the wane—their beauty is fading—and in appearance they resemble females of five or six years older in our western climes. But it was not so with Indora. If, in speaking of her age, she had chosen to diminish it by half-a-dozen years, no one would have questioned the truth of the assertion. In every sense was the lustre of her beauty undimmed; while the lapse of time appeared only to add to its gorgeousness and its grandeur. There was a dewy freshness on the rich red lips—the teeth which they disclosed were whiter than ivory, even as if arranged by the nicest mechanical art, and in faultless preservation. Her breath was sweet and balmy as that of a youthful maiden's; and in a word, her appearance was altogether as if she had taken the most studious care to protect her wondrous beauty against all those effects of time and circumstances which could mar its freshness or dim its brightness.

It was at about eight o'clock in the evening that we thus find the Princess Indora seated in her exquisitely furnished apartment—and evidently awaiting some expected arrival. Hopeful happiness was depicted upon her countenance: its light was dancing in the depths of her coal-black eyes; and the flutter of her heart was indicated by the quick swelling and sinking of her bosom. What was passing in the mind of the Princess Indora that she was thus hopeful and happy, and yet to a certain extent agitated with suspense? Was it that she thought of her love—that long, faithful, impassioned, and trustful love of her's—and that she had reason to believe it would shortly be crowned with bliss?

Presently the door opened; and Sagoonah made her appearance. A rapid searching glance did the ayah fling upon her mistress as she crossed the threshold—for one single moment too did the vindictive expression of a tigress pass over the features of the Hindoo woman—and then as her eyes instantaneously sank again, she stood before the Princess with her wonted respectful deference of manner.

"What is it, Sagoonah?" inquired Indora hastily. "Is it——"

She stopped short; and the colour heightened upon her cheeks—while the other evidences of her suspense were enhanced.

"Two Commissioners from Inderabad have arrived in London, my lady," answered Sagoonah; "and they crave an immediate audience."

"Two Commissioners?" ejaculated Indora, the colour suddenly vanishing from her cheeks. "What can this mean? Has anything happened to my dear father? It was but the other day that his messengers were here!——But speak, Sagoonah!—what say they?"—and the Princess was painfully excited.

"They said nothing, my lady," answered the ayah, "beyond inquiring in respect to your ladyship's health and in soliciting an immediate audience. But they are in mourning, my lady——"

"In mourning?" echoed Indora, with a half-shriek. "Oh, then I must anticipate the worst! But let them enter—introduce them quick!"

Sagoonah hastened to obey the mandate: and in a few moments the two commissioners from Inderabad were ushered into the presence of the Princess. One was a venerable old man, in whom Indora at once recognised a faithful and long-attached Minister in her father's service: the other was a personage of middle age and wore a military uniform. Him also Indora knew full well: he was one of her father's equerries. Both were men of distinction and of high rank; and, as Sagoonah had intimated, they wore the purple emblems of mourning which were customary when death had to be deplored in the kingdom of Inderabad.

The two Commissioners prostrated themselves at the feet of Indora: their hearts were evidently full of emotion: and the Princess was seized with a mingled consternation and dismay which forbade her from putting the question that had risen up to her lips. At length the elder Commissioner murmured forth in a tremulous voice, "Gracious Queen, accept the allegiance which we offer for ourselves and on the part of all your Majesty's faithful subjects."

"Ah! then my beloved father is no more!" said Indora, in a deep voice: and covering her countenance with her hands, she burst into tears.

The Commissioners rose from their suppliant posture, and stood in attitudes of respect in the presence of her whom they had just hailed as their Queen. Indora appeared to forget their presence:—at that instant one idea was uppermost in her mind—that her father was no more, and that he had died while she was far away in a foreign land. Bitterly, bitterly did the lady weep. Oh, if she could only have been there to close her father's eyes and to receive his last injunctions! Oh, if the wings of a bird could have been given to her at the time, that she might have soared over seas and over lands to minister in the last hours of that beloved father—she would not have to reproach herself now! But she was stricken with remorse; for she felt as if she had been guilty of a crime in being absent from that sire in his supreme moments. At length she recollected that the Commissioners were present: she raised her looks—she wiped her eyes; but in a voice that was deep as if clouded with inward weeping, she said, "Tell me, my friends, how spoke my poor father of his daughter in his last illness?"

"His Majesty," replied the senior Commissioner, "commanded us to bear unto our future Queen the assurances of that paternal love which had never diminished—of that father's fondness which endured until the end."

"My poor father!" murmured Indora, again weeping. "But what else said he?" she inquired, after a few minutes' pause, and again drying her eyes.

"His Majesty commanded us," responded the chief Commissioner, "to assure our future Queen that he left her a Kingdom in the highest state of prosperity—a well-filled treasury, and a population that has not to complain of oppressive taxes—a large and well-disciplined army that has cheerfully sworn allegiance to your Majesty as its Queen—thriving towns, the wealth and civilisation of which are not to be outvied by even the cities of the English in other parts of India. In a word, your Majesty is now, by the will of heaven, called upon to rule over a great and a happy nation, in whose heart your image is enshrined, and who will welcome with enthusiastic acclaims their Lady-Sovereign home."

Indora was profoundly affected, not only on account of her father's death, but likewise by the language which the Commissioner thus addressed to her. She wept for the memory of her perished sire—she wept likewise to know herself a Queen. She wept for the lost one—and she wept because a diadem had descended upon her brows. And there—in that villa, which, sumptuous though it were, was a mere humble cottage in comparison with the gorgeous palaces of Inderabad,—there sate this lady, the Queen of one of the mightiest independent nations of the East!

The Chief Commissioner proceeded to give her Majesty certain details relative to her father's death, and also with reference to the arrangements that had been made for the government of the kingdom until her return. It appeared that only a couple of days after the King of Inderabad had despatched those messengers, who, as we have already seen, waited upon Indora at her villa, he was seized with a sudden illness, which in a few hours proved fatal. But the instant his physicians told him that the worst was to be apprehended, he ordered all the troops of the capital to be marshalled in the great square in front of the palace, that they might take the oath of allegiance to his daughter who was absent. It was scarcely necessary to require this display of loyalty on their part: for the different regiments, on learning what the object was, marched to the great square proclaiming Indora's name. The dying King ordered his attendants to bear him forth upon a balcony, whence by signs he expressed his gratitude to the troops and their commanders. In a few hours afterwards he had ceased to exist. For three days the inhabitants of Inderabad hung their houses with black draperies in token of mourning for their deceased monarch; and then, the funeral being over, there was a brilliant illumination, for three days also, in honour of their Lady-Sovereign. The late King had no near relatives with the exception of Indora: and this was so far fortunate, that there was no pretender to dispute her claim to the throne. A Regency was formed, consisting of a council of five of the highest dignitaries of the country, all of whom were devoted to the late monarch and his living daughter; and the two Commissioners who now waited upon Indora, were at once despatched off to England to communicate all these tidings.

The new Queen listened with a profound interest to everything thus imparted to her; and in suitable terms she expressed her acknowledgments to the Commissioners for the loving loyalty that had been shown her and for the wise measures that had been adopted. As a token of her gratitude, she bestowed upon each a ring of immense value; and she dismissed them for the present, bidding them return to her upon the morrow.

Indora was now once more alone: but not for many minutes was she left to her reflections,—for Sagoonah shortly reappeared, to announce the arrival of Mr. Redcliffe. The Commissioners had said nothing to the ayah in respect to the object of their visit; but she suspected what it was—yes, she suspected that her mistress was now a Queen! Indora would have informed her of the fact: but the announcement of the arrival of him whom she had been expecting, made her heart flutter once more, and afforded her not the leisure for the moment to hold any conversation with her dependant. She hastily bade Sagoonah introduce Mr. Redcliffe; and the ayah's eyes—those burning, brilliant, haunting eyes—flashed forth strange fires as she turned to execute the bidding of her mistress. During her temporary absence, Queen Indora composed her countenance as well as she was able: but it was difficult indeed for one of her fine feelings and affectionate nature thus to put off even transiently the traces of that sorrow which the intelligence of her father's death had excited in her bosom.

Mr. Redcliffe entered; and Sagoonah, having ushered him in, immediately withdrew from the apartment. We should observe that the incidents we are relating occurred some days after that interview between Mr. Redcliffe and the twins, when he inspected the memorials of their departed mother; and on this particular evening Christina had gone to pass a few hours with her brother Christian at Mrs. Macaulay's. Sagoonah was not therefore afraid of being detected while listening at the door of the apartment—and she did listen.

Mr. Redcliffe entered, as we have said; and at once taking the hand of the Queen—though he as yet knew not that she was aught more than a Princess still—he said, "Has your Highness reflected well on the note which I sent you the other morning by Christian Ashton?"

"I have reflected," answered Indora, in a tremulous voice, with downcast looks, and with blushing countenance: "and yet there was no need for it—because—because my love could know no change—it is immutable! it is immortal!"

"Then, Indora, I am here," resumed Mr. Redcliffe, "to fulfil the pledge which I gave you when last we met within these walls. I told you that I had a self-imposed mission to fulfil, and to investigate circumstances which were enveloped in doubt and mystery. In a word, before I dared think of love again, it was needful that I should ascertain the fate of one who——"

"No more!" interrupted the Queen: "I know all!"

"All?" echoed Mr. Redcliffe. "Yes—it *must* be so—or else you would never have gone——"

"Ah! you know that I went thither?" ejaculated Indora, at once penetrating his thoughts.

"Yes—but let me explain presently," said Mr. Redcliffe. "Tell me, Indora—how did you learn everything——"

"And I also will explain presently!" rejoined the eastern lady. "First let us speak of that which is nearest to us—and dearest at least to *me*. You have discovered that she whom you sought is no more——is it not so? is it not that which you would have me understand?"

"It is," answered Redcliffe. "And now listen to me, Indora. No man can be insensible of the boundless—the illimitable love which you have borne for me; and it is impossible I can repay it with ingratitude. On the former occasions when we met within these walls, I spoke—and perhaps spoke harshly—of my long, long detention in your royal father's capital: but *that* I have forgotten—or at least forgiven. I know that you love me, Indora; you have given many, many proofs of it—and it is not in my nature——no, by heaven! it is not in my nature to plant a dagger in such a heart as your's!"

"Clement," murmured Indora, "these words from your lips infuse an unknown happiness into my soul!"

"Yet listen to me again," resumed Redcliffe, still retaining her hand in his own. "The power of loving as I once loved—another——" and his voice faltered——"is dead within me. But if, all other circumstances apart, you can accept the hand of one who will esteem and cherish you—who will lavish upon you all that tenderness which your own long-enduring love so much merits,—if you can be contented with an affectionate friendship which in itself will be a real love,—then, Indora, you may claim me as a husband."

Tears trickled down the lady's cheeks—for her heart was full of ineffable emotions: the words she would have spoken died upon her lips—but to those lips she pressed Clement Redcliffe's hand.

"Listen to me again, Indora," he continued, himself deeply moved. "You are beautiful—the handsomest of living women! You retain too all the first freshness of your youth—the jettiness of your hair will not for years to come be streaked with grey—nor the lustre of your eyes be dimmed. But how different is it with me! Though still in my prime, so far as years are concerned, yet am I prematurely old. *My* hair is streaked with grey——and Oh! if the sorrows, the afflictions, and the wretchedness I have endured be taken into account, it were no marvel if I were bowed down as though it were with an intolerable burden!"

"Continue not thus, Clement!" interrupted Indora, pressing his hand to her bosom and then to her lips. "As I have assured you before, I repeat the assurance now—that I only behold in you the idol of my own imagination. I see you as you were when first I learnt to love you in the far-off city of Inderabad; and, Oh! I shall ever love you! Though all in an instant your hair were to turn white, and your form were to be bowed, and you were to present the appearance of old age's decrepitude, I should love you—Oh, I should love you just the same! And think you, Clement, that there is not gratitude mixed up with this love of mine? Think you I can be unmindful that it was you who were the preceptor of my childhood—who taught me whatsoever accomplishments I possess—and what is more," added Indora solemnly, and in the fervour of a grateful piety, "who instructed me in the sublime truths of Christianity? Or again, think you that I am unmindful of how you introduced the arts and sciences of civilisation into my father's Kingdom—how you taught him a liberal and enlightened policy—and how by virtue of your lessons he was enabled to advance his people to the highest point of prosperity and happiness? No, Clement—I have forgotten naught of all these things; and thus you see how fervid gratitude is interwoven with my love!"

Never had Indora seemed more eminently beautiful than while thus giving expression to those eloquent outpourings which flowed from her very heart. There was something sublime as well as something ineffably touching in her loveliness at that moment—something grand and pathetic—splendid, and at the same time indescribably interesting, in her looks. Redcliffe would have been something less or something more than man if he had not experienced a sentiment of pride at the thought of calling this inimitable being his wife. And he *did* harbour that feeling—not because she was a princess of the loftiest rank: he forgot at the instant her royal descent—he beheld in her only a magnificent, an interesting, a noble-minded, and a loving woman.

"Indora," he said, "never, never can I forget the words you have just spoken!—they prove all the generosity of your heart. But listen to me once again. You know *all*——yes, I am aware that you *must* know all; and therefore you are not ignorant of the horrible mystery——"

"Oh, Clement! there is justice in heaven," exclaimed Indora; "and that mystery will be cleared up! But even if it were *not*, think you that I——This is however a topic," she ejaculated, "on which we must speak presently!"

"Be it so," answered Redcliffe. "And now, Indora, if all these things be well weighed in your mind, and if you be firmly convinced that your life's happiness can be ensured by linking your fate with mine, the affirmative response shall go forth from my lip."

"Clement, I am thine!" answered Indora: and her head sank upon his breast.

He clasped her in his arms: she wept with a variety of conflicting feelings: for joy and sorrow were now strangely blended in her heart. Her love was to be crowned with happiness—but she had lost a father!

"Oh, Clement!" she murmured, "you know not what I feel—you cannot comprehend it! The hope of long, long years is about to be fulfilled; and I have it in my power to testify unto you all the immensity of the love which I experience. I know that you seek not for titles—that you care not for earthly honours: but you will at least feel a pleasure in being placed in a position which will enable you to do good to your fellow-creatures. Clement," she added, in a voice that rose with a sort of exultation, "it is not a Princess who offers you her hand: it is a Queen who can seat you by her side upon a throne, and who will rejoice to see her subjects governed by the wisdom and the philanthropy of such a man!"

"Indora, what mean you?" asked Redcliffe in astonishment. "Your father——"

"He is no more," replied the eastern lady. "This very evening, high dignitaries from my own kingdom have sought me here to communicate the intelligence. And, Oh! if you found me not weeping and displaying all the evidences of grief on account of my father's death, it was because until this moment I subdued all I felt—I veiled it to the utmost of my power—I would not seem sad when you came to tell me that you would accept me as your bride."

Mr. Redcliffe sympathized with Indora on the loss of her father; and they now went on to converse on those topics to which they had hitherto only alluded distantly, and which they had agreed to postpone until other matters were settled. But we need not penetrate further into the discourse which thus passed between them: suffice it to say that it was long and solemnly interesting to both.

It was a little past ten o'clock when Clement Redcliffe took his leave of Indora, and issued from the apartment,—leaving her to reflect upon the two main incidents of the evening, so conflicting and so opposite—one infusing sorrow and the other joy into her heart. Sagoonah had listened at the door until this leave-taking reached her ears; and then she glided down into the hall to be in readiness to open the front door for Mr. Redcliffe. He descended the stairs—he traversed the hall—Sagoonah opened the door; and as he turned to bid her good night, he was struck by the expression of her large brilliant eyes. They seemed to vibrate upon him with a light that made him for a moment tremble—with a lustre that was so sinister and so supernal, it smote him as it were with an unknown terror. The recollection flashed to his mind that this was not the first time he had seen those eyes thus flame and burn as they were fixed upon him: he stopped short, and was about to ask Sagoonah wherefore she thus regarded him, —when all of a sudden those eyes of her's were cast down—her demeanour became profoundly respectful—and Redcliffe suffered the question to remain unasked.

He bade the ayah good night—and issued from the dwelling: but as he traversed the garden, and thence continued his way along the lane leading towards the main road, he felt as if he were still followed by Sagoonah's haunting eyes.

CHAPTER XCV.

THE CONSERVATORY.

The dusk was setting in on the evening of the following day, when two individuals who had been walking and holding a long discourse together in the neighbourhood of Oaklands, shook hands and separated. One was Purvis, the old steward, who now retraced his way towards Marchmont's ducal seat: the other was Clement Redcliffe, who hastily struck across the fields in the direction of a cottage where he had been wont to take up his quarters on the three or four occasions that he had visited this part of the country.

In a few minutes he reached the road, along which he had to continue his way for about a quarter of a mile, in order to arrive at that cottage: but he was destined to experience an adventure ere that walk, brief though it were, was accomplished. For as he was proceeding along, it struck him that he observed a female form lying by the side of the road in the shade of the hedge. He approached the object, and found that his surmise was correct. A female lay motionless there, with her face downward; and Redcliffe was instantaneously smitten with the idea that it was a corpse which he looked upon. He hastened to raise her up; and so far as the obscurity of the evening would permit, he saw that she was decently clad, that she was a woman of tall stature, and that she possessed the remains if not of actual beauty, at least of a countenance that had not been ill-looking. The woman was comparatively young too—not many years beyond thirty: but she had a haggard careworn aspect. Her eyes were closed: the warmth of life was however in her; and Redcliffe was thus relieved from the idea that he was gazing upon the victim of a foul crime, or of starvation, exhaustion, or of sudden natural death.

The cottage, as we have said, was at no great distance: and thither Mr. Redcliffe hastily bore the woman in his arms. The occupants of the little habitation at once received her: for they were entirely obedient to the will of Mr. Redcliffe, whose liberality as a paymaster they had experienced on more occasions than one. The unconscious female was placed upon a couch; and by the means adopted to restore her she was so far brought back to life as to leave little or no apprehension as to the result. Still she continued in a state of unconsciousness as to what was passing around her; and having slowly opened her eyes, she closed them again,—their temporary expression being full of a listless vacancy.

"She cannot be an ordinary tramp," said Mr. Redcliffe to the woman of the cottage. "Perhaps she is subject to fits——"

"Or else she fell down, sir, through sheer exhaustion? For look! her shoes are completely worn through—aye, and the stockings likewise!—her poor feet are all cut and bleeding. I will foment them with hot water; and this may likewise tend to bring her back to consciousness."

"Do so," said Mr. Redcliffe. "But perhaps it would be as well to ascertain if we can who she is? Probably," he added, as the circumstances of Crazy Jane flashed to his memory, and suggested the remark he was now making,—"she may be some unfortunate idiot who has escaped from her friends: for her apparel is decent, and she has not the air of one who by ordinary circumstances could be reduced to houseless wanderings, penury, and destitution. I will leave this room—and you can join me presently in the parlour, when you have searched her person thoroughly; so that if there should happen to be any letters or papers about her, you can bring them to me."

This scene took place in a bed-chamber to which the woman had been borne; and Mr. Redcliffe descended to the parlour which he occupied at the cottage. In about ten minutes the elderly female who was left in attendance upon her, and who was the mistress of the little habitation, rejoined Mr. Redcliffe, who instantaneously perceived that she bore several articles in her hands.

"The poor creature is very far from being a common tramp," said the woman: "for, look here, sir!—there is a purse well filled with gold and silver—several jewellery-trinkets—and this sealed packet."

Mr. Redcliffe took the articles; and opening the purse, he found that it contained about twenty guineas: the jewels were old fashioned, and might be worth a similar sum: the sealed packet had no address upon it.

"Is the woman recovering?" he inquired.

"She every now and then opens her eyes, sir," was the response,—"looks vacantly up—and then closes them again. I am pretty sure she will recover: but what are we to do with her? If she has any friends, they may be anxious about her——"

"That is precisely what I am thinking," said Mr. Redcliffe; "and therefore, although under any circumstances I dislike opening private papers,—yet on the present occasion such a course seems absolutely necessary. Go back to the poor woman—do your best for her—and in the meanwhile I will see whether this packet will afford us any clue to the knowledge of who she is."

The elderly female retired from the parlour, and Mr. Redcliffe broke the seal of the packet. It contained a letter the address of which made him start suddenly; and he unhesitatingly commenced the perusal of the document. It was a long one: and profound was the interest with which Mr. Redcliffe scanned its contents. When he had concluded, he remained for some minutes absorbed in a profound solemn reverie; and then he murmured to himself, "Truly the finger of heaven has of late been manifesting itself in signal and marvellous ways for the development of the deepest mysteries! Here is another link in the chain of evidence——But who can this woman be?"

In a few minutes the mistress of the cottage reappeared,—saying, "Have you discovered, sir, who she is?"

"No," replied Mr. Redcliffe; "and more than ever am I anxious to make that discovery. By a singular coincidence this letter regards a certain business in which I am deeply interested: but it affords no clue as to who the woman herself may be. Does she get better?"

"She still lingers in a sort of swoon," was the answer: "but two or three times she has again opened her eyes; and once her lips moved as if she were trying to say something. What do you think, sir, had better be done? Ah, here is my old man come back from the village!" ejaculated the woman, as the cottage-door opened at the instant and heavy footsteps were heard in the little passage which divided the two ground-floor rooms of the humble dwelling.

"He must hasten off to the village again and fetch a surgeon," answered Mr. Redcliffe. "Go and tell him to do so."

The woman issued from the room; and her husband almost immediately took his departure again, for the purpose of executing the commission with which he was now charged. His wife returned to the parlour, to see if Mr. Redcliffe had any further instructions to issue.

"I am compelled to go out again presently," said Mr. Redcliffe: "you must therefore continue to do your best for this poor woman; and when the surgeon arrives, you can tell him under what circumstances she was discovered in the road. You may mention, if you choose, that she possesses this money and these trinkets: but you will say nothing about the sealed packet,—of which I shall retain possession, at least for the present. If the poor creature herself returns fully to consciousness before I come back—and if she should ask concerning her property—you can show her that her money and her jewels are safe; and you can tell her that the packet is in the hands of the gentleman who found her in the road—that he will take great care of it—and that he wishes to have some conversation with her in respect to its contents."

Having issued these instructions, Mr. Redcliffe resumed his cloak: for the evening was chill, and a mist was rising. Going forth from the cottage, he pursued his way for a short distance along the road—and thence he struck into the fields, across which he proceeded in the direction of Oaklands. It was now about nine o'clock in the evening; and the mist was growing into the density of a fog. A stranger in those parts would not have found his way towards the mansion through the obscurity: but Mr. Redcliffe appeared to be well acquainted with every inch of the ground; and he soon reached the spacious gardens belonging to the ducal country-seat. He halted at the pediment of a particular statue; and there in a few minutes he was joined by the old steward Purvis.

Only a few words were exchanged between them; and they proceeded together towards the mansion. They reached a large greenhouse or conservatory, which was built against the length of one entire side of the edifice, and into which the windows of a suite of three rooms opened. The reader will therefore understand that there were means of communication from those rooms with the conservatory: but we must add that there was likewise a door opening from the conservatory itself into the garden. It was towards this door that Purvis and Mr. Redcliffe proceeded; and the old steward opened it by means of a key which he had taken care to have about him. Mr. Redcliffe entered: Purvis gently closed the door behind him—and hurrying away, re-entered the mansion by another mode of ingress.

Into the conservatory looked the windows of the dining-room that was used on ordinary occasions, as well as those of the library and billiard-room. From one of these apartments only were lights now shining; and this was the dining-room. Within that room two individuals were seated at a table covered with dessert and wine: these individuals were the Duke of Marchmont and the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

Mr. Redcliffe advanced cautiously and noiselessly—amidst the rare exotics, the choice plants, and the tropical trees with which the conservatory was crowded—towards the window which was nearest to the table where the Duke and his guest were seated. The draperies were so far drawn over all the windows that they only suffered the light to penetrate through narrow openings; and thus, as the reader will understand, the casements themselves were almost completely veiled from the eyes of those who were seated inside the apartment. Through the opening in the curtains Mr. Redcliffe noticed them; and with the utmost caution he unfastened the casement. Doubtless he had been already informed by Purvis that he might risk this much; and he had also received the assurance that the casement would yield to his touch. It did so: and opening it to the extent of two or three inches, he could now overhear whatsoever passed betwixt the Duke and his guest. So well built was the conservatory, and so warm was the air therein from the effect of artificial heat, that no draught could penetrate through the opening of the casement; and thus there was nothing to lead the Duke or Mr. Stanhope to suspect that the window was open at all. We must add that Stanhope sate with his back to Mr. Redcliffe; and consequently the Duke of Marchmont had his face towards him.

"And now will your Grace at length be explicit?" inquired Stanhope, as he filled his glass from one of the exquistely cut decanters.

"Let us take a little more wine," responded the Duke, "before we get to the dry details of business."

"So far from taking any more wine," said Wilson Stanhope, "I think I ought to keep my head clear: for it can assuredly be no ordinary matter on which your lordship is about to speak."

"I admit that it is important," rejoined the Duke: "I have already told you so."

"But *more* important, I fancy," observed Stanhope, "than your Grace has hitherto given me to understand. At first you were to enter into explanations the other night at the Clarendon Hotel, when I dined with you——"

"I do not think that I promised to be explicit on that occasion," answered the Duke. "I merely told you that after our wine, on that particular evening, I would take and introduce you to your intended mistress, the beautiful Marion; and I fulfilled my promise. In a word, Stanhope, I have been true to every promise I made you; the five hundred pounds were paid into a banker's to your account——"

"Yes, my lord," interrupted Stanhope, "you have done all this; and it is because you have done so much that I can judge of the importance of the service, whatever it may be, in which you seek to engage me. You could not, or you would not, tell me in London: but you make an appointment for me to meet you privately down here——"

"To be sure!" ejaculated Marchmont,—"where we could dine together *tête-à-tête*, as we have done—and where without fear of being interrupted or overheard, we may discuss the service that I need at your hands."

"And now, the sooner that discussion commences, the better," observed Stanhope. "I am open to almost anything: but I love not suspense. It is like groping one's way in the dark——And, ah! by the bye, my lord, I hope that whatsoever new task you are about to confide to me, will not be baffled and defeated so completely as the former one was——I mean with respect to that affair of the Duchess——"

"Enough!" interrupted the Duke impatiently. "Think you that I could for a moment misunderstand your meaning?"

"And now with regard to the present business?" said Stanhope.

"You are a man," resumed the Duke of Marchmont, "of expensive habits—accustomed to luxurious living; and the sum of five hundred pounds which I paid into your account the other day, will prove but as a drop to the ocean in comparison with your lavish mode of expenditure. Indeed, you are a man, Stanhope, who ought to be able to reckon your money by thousands instead of by hundreds."

"If all this," exclaimed Stanhope, "is to lead to the assurance that your Grace can put me in the way of gaining thousands, it will assuredly be the most welcome intelligence that I shall have heard for a very long time past."

"It is the truth that I am telling you!" rejoined the Duke of Marchmont: and then he added after a pause, in a lower tone, and fixing his looks significantly upon his guest, "It is not five, nor ten, nor fifteen thousand pounds that I should hesitate to place in your hands, if you could only accomplish the aim which I have in view."

Mr. Redcliffe fancied that Wilson Stanhope must have been astounded by this announcement: for although he could not see that individual's face, he could nevertheless judge by his manner, as well as by his prolonged silence, that he was gazing in a sort of stupefied amazement upon the Duke of Marchmont. As for the Duke himself, he kept

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his eyes riveted with a peculiar significancy upon Stanhope, as if endeavouring to foreshadow by his looks that further elucidation of his purpose which he hardly knew how to shape in words. For even when villain is talking to villain there is a height of villany which embarrasses the one how to propose it in all its hideous details to the other. The lustre of the lamp shone full upon the countenance of Marchmont: a few minutes back it had been flushed with wine—but now it was very pale; and it wore so sinister an expression that Redcliffe shuddered, and could even have groaned in his horror, were he not sensible of the necessity of keeping on his guard, and were he not likewise thoroughly master of his feelings and emotions.

"So many thousands of pounds!" said Stanhope, at length breaking that long silence, and speaking as if he were still in a state of wondering incredulity. "Why, my lord," he added in a voice that became suddenly hoarse, "it can be little short of murder that you wish me to do at such a price and for such a reward!"

"And if it were," said the Duke, in a tone that was scarcely audible to Mr. Redcliffe at the casement,—"would you——"

"Would I undertake it?——But this is ridiculous!" ejaculated Mr. Stanhope. "Your Grace is playing a part—heaven knows for what purpose!—or else you are joking. And let me tell you that the jest is a very sorry one!"

"And if I were *not* joking," said the Duke,—"if I were serious——"

"Then I should say," rejoined Stanhope quickly, "that having got hold of a man whose circumstances were the other day desperate, and may soon become desperate again—you are holding out to him such a temptation——But, pshaw! you do not mean it!"

"I tell you that I mean it," answered the Duke, with the air of a man who was suddenly resolved to beat about the bush no longer, "but to come to the point."

"You mean it?" said Stanhope: and then there was another long pause, during which they eyed each other with that significancy which characterizes villany when coming to an understanding with villany.

"Now listen to me," resumed the Duke of Marchmont. "We are speaking within four walls; and I know it is impossible there can be any one to overhear us. If you fall into my views, good and well: but if you think to draw forth explanations from my lips in order that, *without* executing my purpose, you may henceforth exercise a power over me,—you will be mistaken! For were you perfidiously to breathe a syllable in betrayal of what is now taking place, I should indignantly deny it: and who would believe your word against that of the Duke of Marchmont? You see that I am speaking candidly, Stanhope—because candour is necessary under the circumstances."

"I do not find fault with your Grace for thus acting," answered Stanhope; "and now at least I know that you are serious. Proceed, my lord: there can be no harm done in giving your explanations."

"They are brief," responded the Duke; "and not many minutes need elapse ere you will have to come to a decision. There is a certain woman——a lady I ought to call her——who by some means has mixed herself up most unpleasantly in certain affairs of mine. She may mean nothing more than what she has hitherto done: or, on the other hand, she may mean a great deal more and is only biding her time. I have every reason to apprehend that this latter supposition is the true one:—therefore am I desirous——In plain terms, Stanhope, this woman is an enemy whom—whom I must——Perdition seize it! Let the words be spoken!——whom I must remove from my path. Ask me not for further explanations: but say—and say quickly, Stanhope—to what extent I may count upon your assistance?"

"Now, look you, my lord," said Wilson Stanhope. "As to whether I will do this or anything else for such a sum as fifteen thousand pounds—mark! you have said fifteen thousand pounds!—is a question speedily settled. I will. But in saying this, I can of course only speak conditionally. If there is very much risk—so much that one's neck must approach uncomfortably near a halter—I should think it is a venture on which you could scarcely expect me to embark. Therefore when I say I will do it, it is in the belief that you have already devised some plan which you merely require me to carry out."

"I have," answered the Duke of Marchmont. "The lady of whom I am speaking, frequently walks in her garden in the cool of the evening; and although we are now entering upon the autumnal month of September, yet I know that she still continues her rambles in that garden, apparently absorbed in reverie, even after the dusk has closed in. Sometimes she is accompanied by a young lady who lives with her—at other times she is attended by a female servant: but occasionally she is alone. Of this I am assured: for during the last fortnight I have frequently watched in that neighbourhood."

"Proceed, my lord," said Stanhope, refilling his glass.

"It is for you to seize an opportunity when she is alone," continued the Duke of Marchmont: "there are approaches to her residence by which you may steal thither unperceived——"

"Stop, my lord!" said Wilson Stanhope: "all this is very well—and I comprehend you easily enough. A dagger or a pistol would rid you of this female enemy of your's. But what about the reward? If once the deed is done, what guarantee have I that my recompense is forthcoming? Will you give it me first of all?"

"First of all?" echoed the Duke. "And then what guarantee have I that you will perform *your* part?"

"Now your Grace sees the difficulty," coolly remarked Wilson Stanhope. "In plain terms, we cannot trust each other. You will not give me the reward beforehand: and I will not undertake the business without the prepayment of the reward. Suppose that I did—and suppose the deed to be done: I come to your Grace—you assume the indignant—you play the virtuous—you repudiate me—and what redress have I? To threaten in such a case would be foolish: your lordship would laugh at my threats! As for carrying them out, it would be madness; because on my part it would be giving my neck to a halter, with only the remote chance that you would swing next to me on the same gibbet."

"You refuse, therefore," said Marchmont.

"I refuse," replied Stanhope,—"unless every shilling——No!" he interrupted himself, "I will effect a compromise with you. You have specified the recompense at fifteen thousand pounds: give me the half—seven thousand five hundred—and I swear to do the deed, trusting to your honour to pay me the remainder."

The Duke of Marchmont deliberated for some moments, with vexation and bitter annoyance visibly depicted upon his countenance: but suddenly breaking silence, he exclaimed, "I will do it."

"Give me your cheque, and full particulars in respect to the lady—her whereabouts—and so forth——"

"We will settle this matter at once," said the Duke. "I should have a cheque-book here: for I brought that writing-case down with me from London this afternoon."

Thus speaking, the villanous nobleman rose from his seat; and proceeding to a side table, took thence the writing-case to which he had alluded. Resuming his seat, he opened it, and drew forth his cheque-book. At that same instant Mr. Redcliffe opened the casement to a width sufficient to enable him to take his stand upon the threshold: for the window, be it understood, reached to the floor, and thus served the purpose of a glass door. The reader will recollect that he was enveloped in his cloak. He raised his right arm as if in a warning manner: the folds of the cloak flowing over it, partially obscured his countenance by intercepting the beams of the lamp which stood upon the table: yet his face could be seen, though with a shadow upon it, if the Duke of Marchmont were to raise his eyes from the desk. With his left hand Mr. Redcliffe held the crimson drapery aside:—and there he stood motionless.

"Now observe," said the Duke, as he began to fill in the date of the cheque,—"when you present this at the bank to-morrow, you must appear to be in high glee; and you must, as if boastfully, declare that you had a run of luck to-night and that this was the produce of the card-table. You understand me?"

As the Duke of Marchmont put this question, before he filled in the body of the cheque,—he raised his eyes: an ejaculation of horror burst from his lips—the pen fell from his hand—he reeled on his seat and sank senseless on the floor. At that same instant Redcliffe stepped back and closed the casement. The next moment he was outside the conservatory, the door of which he locked, and he hurried away. Regaining the statue where he had encountered Purvis about an hour back, he found the steward again waiting for him there, he having arrived at the place of appointment about ten minutes previously. Redcliffe spoke a few hasty words of explanation—returned the key to the old man—and hurried off.

CHAPTER XCVI.

THE HAND-BILL.

The Hon. Wilson Stanhope was taken so much by surprise, and was seized with so much consternation, at the Duke of Marchmont's proceeding that he did not look round to ascertain what was the cause of his Grace's terror. Then, at the same instant that the vile nobleman sank upon the carpet, Stanhope sprang forward to raise him up; and thus when he did fling a glance towards the casement, the drapery had ceased to be agitated. Though utterly unable to comprehend the meaning of the circumstance, Mr. Stanhope thought it would not be well to summon the domestics to the Duke's succour: he accordingly bore him to a sofa —loosened his neck-tie—and by sprinkling water on his countenance, endeavoured to recover him. In a few minutes the Duke slowly opened his eyes —gazed vacantly up at Stanhope for a moment— and then, as if smitten by a sudden and terrific recollection, flung his horrified looks towards the casement.

No one was there: the Duke raised his hand to his brow—gave a low subdued groan—and then suddenly starting up, rushed to the window. Flinging aside the draperies, he opened the casement, and looked into the conservatory. He could see no one; and stopping short, he again raised his hand to his brow, muttering, "Could it possibly have been the imagination?"

"What in the devil's name ails your Grace?" inquired Wilson Stanhope, who had followed him to the threshold of the window. "What does all this mean? You have absolutely terrified me!"

"What does it mean?" asked the Duke, gazing vacantly at his questioner. "It means——But no! you cannot understand it!"

"Did you suppose, my lord," inquired Stanhope, "that anybody was listening or looking on? For if so, we may have placed ourselves in no very comfortable predicament——"

"It was nothing!—rest assured it was nothing!" hastily interrupted the Duke of Marchmont, making incredible efforts to regain his self-possession.

"Nothing?" ejaculated Stanhope impatiently— "it is preposterous to tell me that it was nothing, when you were so awfully alarmed. If I believed in ghosts, I should veritably fancy you had seen one."

"A ghost?"—and it was with a countenance as white as a sheet that the Duke of Marchmont now gazed upon the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

"By heaven," cried the latter, who was himself almost as much alarmed as astonished, "there must be something in all this! Did you fancy that you saw some one? He may have escaped!"—and Stanhope rushed to the outer door of the conservatory. "Locked! fast locked! But these windows—they belong to other rooms!—and see! the casements open! they are not fastened inside! My lord, if it were one of your domestics who is playing the spy upon you, I would counsel you to take heed. As for myself, I wash my hands altogether of the business you propose to me—I will have nothing to do with it—I wish to heaven that you had not even spoken to me on the subject! There is such a thing as running one's head into a noose at the very instant one thinks that safety and security are the most complete."

Stanhope spoke with considerable vehemence and excitement; and his speech had been interrupted by the hurried visits he paid to the door of the conservatory and to the casements of the adjoining billiard-room and library. The Duke listened to him with a sort of dismayed stupefaction, as well as with haggard looks. He spoke not a word: but hastening, or rather staggering back like one inebriate into the dining-room, he tossed off a large bumper of wine. Then, still in silence, he replaced his cheque-book in the writing-case, which he was about to lock,—when Stanhope, who had followed him thither, laid his hand upon his shoulder. The Duke, who had not perceived that he was so near, started with a visible tremor; and again his haggard looks contemplated Stanhope with a kind of vacant dismay.

"My lord," said the latter, "there is something more in all this than I comprehend. Either you were smitten with a real terror or a fanciful one. If the former, there must be a real danger, which I now incur as well as yourself: and if the latter, you must have a very evil conscience. At all events it may be worth your lordship's while to keep on friendly terms with me; and therefore you will scarcely lock up that writing-desk until you have given me some token of——what shall we call it?—your liberality——that term will do:"—and Stanhope chuckled ironically.

For a moment the Duke of Marchmont appeared inclined to resist with indignation his extortionate demand: but a second thought induced him to yield. He accordingly drew forth the cheque-book, and filled in a draft for a thousand guineas instead of for upwards of seven times that sum, as he had at first intended. Stanhope took the cheque—glanced at its contents—and on seeing the amount, consigned it to his pocket with a complacent smile, as if he thought that when the sum had been dissipated he might reckon upon procuring more from the same quarter. He did not care to press the Duke for any farther explanation as to the scene which had taken place: he saw that the topic was an unpleasant one: but he had his suspicion that the hint he had thrown out relative to the darkness of the nobleman's conscience was very far from being incorrect.

The Duke remained abstracted and thoughtful for the rest of the evening; and Stanhope, anxious to escape from such gloomy companionship, retired early to the apartment which was provided for his reception. The instant that Marchmont was left alone, he rang the bell, and ordered Purvis to be immediately sent to him. The old steward soon made his appearance, with his habitual demeanour of respectfulness; and the Duke—motioning him to advance close up to where he had halted from a troubled walk to and fro—said in a deep voice, "Purvis, something strange again has occurred this evening."

"Strange, my lord?" said the old steward. "And what is it?"

"You remember that dream of mine—if it were a dream——But I begin to doubt——In short," added Marchmont, most cruelly perplexed, "I know not what to think——But who, Purvis," he suddenly demanded, "keeps the key of the conservatory?"

"It is always in my custody, my lord," responded the old steward. "When the head-gardener requires it, I give it to him: but he always restores it to me—for as Oaklands is so seldom occupied now by your lordship and her Grace, I am always afraid of a set of idle tramps and vagabonds getting into the place."

"Who has the key at this moment?—who has had it all the evening?" demanded the Duke hastily.

"It is here, my lord," replied Purvis, producing the key; "and the gardener has not had it in his possession since the forenoon."

"But those other rooms," said the Duke,—"think you that anybody could have penetrated into them?"

"Not without my knowledge, my lord," responded the steward: "or at all events not without the knowledge of at least some of the servants. But may I be so bold as to inquire why your Grace asks?"

"It is strange—most strange!" muttered the Duke to himself. "Can the dead reappear?—or if he be living, has he come to revisit these scenes which——"

"I am afraid," said Purvis, "that something unpleasant has occurred to your Grace: for your looks are very much discomposed——"

"Enough for the present!" interrupted Marchmont. "I possess a feverish fancy when I think of certain things. Take care, Purvis, that all the doors are carefully locked before you retire to rest. And look well through all the rooms—behind the draperies—in every nook and corner, indeed; for the house is spacious—and it is so easy for any evil-designing person to enter and hide himself. See that you attend to my instructions: but do not appear to be more assiduous on these points than usual in the presence of the other domestics."

The Duke of Marchmont waved his hand for Purvis to retire; and he then proceeded to his own chamber, where he locked himself in.

We must now return to Mr. Redcliffe. After parting from the old steward at the statue, he sped along in the direction of the cottage, where he had left the unknown woman whom he had picked up in the road, as already described. During the short space of time occupied in retracing his way towards that cottage, Mr. Redcliffe reflected upon all that had occurred at Oaklands; and most painful were these reflections. That Queen Indora was the object of the Duke's murderous machinations, he well knew: but that he had paralysed them he was almost equally certain. And now, on his return to the cottage, he hoped to be enabled to receive some explanation from the stranger-woman's lips as to how she had become possessed of the letter contained in the sealed packet: but he was doomed to disappointment. For, on re-entering the cottage, he at once learnt from the mistress thereof that the woman was gone.

"Gone!" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe. "What do you mean?—that she is gone of her own accord? or that the surgeon ordered her to be removed?"

"No, sir," answered the elderly female: "she went away of her own accord."

Mr. Redcliffe passed into his little parlour, the mistress of the house following him; and he then learnt the following explanations:—

Shortly after he had left the cottage on his visit to Oaklands, the woman had begun to rally far more rapidly than at first; and she soon recovered her consciousness. She exhibited mingled terror and astonishment at finding herself in a strange place: then she rapidly felt about her person in search of her property. The mistress of the cottage at once bade her banish all alarm from her mind, for that she was where she would be taken care of well: she then showed her that her money and her trinkets were safe. But the stranger-woman demanded the sealed packet which she had had about her person; and then the mistress of the cottage stated what Mr. Redcliffe had bidden her announce: namely, that it was taken care of on her behalf by the gentleman who had picked her up in the road, and that he wished to have some conversation with her on the subject. The stranger-woman demanded who the gentleman was—but the mistress of the cottage, accustomed to be very discreet in all that regarded her occasional lodger, gave some evasive response, which only had the effect of increasing the stranger's apprehensions. She vowed that she must depart that instant—that she had a long journey to perform, and important business on hand—that she could not therefore wait. The elderly female, fancying that her unfortunate guest was half bereft of reason, entreated her to remain: but nothing could induce her—and she took her precipitate departure, forcing upon her hostess a few shillings in payment of a pair of shoes which the latter insisted upon her taking as substitutes for her own worn-out ones. Thus, when the surgeon arrived, the woman who was to have been his patient had taken her departure.

"There is something exceedingly mysterious in all this," said Mr. Redcliffe. "That woman is no unfortunate idiot, as I had at first supposed: she must be conscious of some misdeed that she has fled thus precipitately. Did she give you no explanation of how she came to sink down upon the road?"

"She said something about exhaustion," was the reply given by the mistress of the cottage; "but she would not tarry to eat so much as a morsel of bread: she merely took a cup of milk—and when I offered to put some food into a little basket for her, she did not appear to listen: she seemed all in a flurry, as if afraid of something, so that I myself thought she could not be altogether right."

"And the surgeon?" said Mr. Redcliffe, inquiringly.

"He rode across on his pony; and on finding that the woman had gone, he grumbled a little—until I assured him that there was a gentleman here who would pay him handsomely. He then went away better pleased. But my husband is not come back from the village yet; and I can't think what detains him."

Scarcely had the woman thus spoken, when the outer door of the cottage was heard to yield to the entrance of some one; and this proved to be the husband on whose account she had been getting anxious.

"Why, what has detained you?" she asked. "You never yet have been given to tippling at the alehouse——"

"And I'm not going to do so now, wife," he replied. "But in the first place there's so thick a mist one can hardly see a yard in front of one; and then Smithers the carrier had just arrived, and he had brought with him some handbills from Guildford, which we all got reading at the bar of the Blue Lion."

"And what are the handbills about?"

"Oh! about some dreadful things that have been discovered up in London yonder—a house where it's supposed three or four people have been murdered at different times, and buried with quicklime in a pit. And so these bills are to offer a hundred pounds' reward to any body who gives the people into custody—what's their names again? Oh, here it is in large print—John Smedley and his wife Barbara—or fifty pounds for either of them separate."

"Let's look," said the woman: and she proceeded to read one of the handbills which her husband had brought with him. "Well now, this is odd!" she ejaculated in a voice of mingled wonder and terror: "why, the description of the woman—dear me! it is the very same! Tall—dark—fine eyes—good teeth—age about three or four and thirty——"

Here the woman's ejaculations were suddenly interrupted by the appearance of Mr. Redcliffe. The colloquy between the husband and wife had taken place in the passage; and the door of Mr Redcliffe's parlour stood ajar. He could not therefore help overhearing what thus passed; and when the conversation took the turn just described, he issued forth, inquiring, "Where are these handbills?"

One was immediately given to him: he hastily scanned its contents; and not a doubt rested in his mind that the woman who had been the object of so much kind attention on his part, was proclaimed as a murderess. The old man of the cottage—who, be it recollected, had not seen the woman at all—was stricken with dismay on learning what sort of a character had been within the walls of his dwelling; and he was by no means sorry to find that her stay had been comparatively so brief.

"It were madness," said Mr. Redcliffe, after a few moments' reflection, "to think of overtaking her through this dense fog. Besides, she has got at least an hour and a half's start of us; and then, as she has money too, she will find means of conveyance. My good friends," added Mr. Redcliffe, "as you are well aware that I have no inclination to be talked about, and do not want my name mentioned, it would be quite as well if nothing were said about the vile woman having been in your cottage. The cause of justice will not suffer on that account: for with this distribution of handbills all over the country, and with the other means which the police are doubtless taking for the detection of herself and her husband, those wretches cannot possibly escape."

The cottager and his wife, who were accustomed to pay implicit obedience to Mr. Redcliffe, promised to be silent in respect to the subject he had named; and when he took his departure at an early hour on the following morning, he rewarded them with even more than his accustomed liberality. But in respect to the paper which had fallen into his possession, what could he think? That its writer had been murdered, and that he was one of the victims to whom the contents of the handbill so terribly pointed. Yes—this was the natural though fearful conjecture which suggested itself to Mr. Redcliffe's mind: but he resolved to set inquiries on foot in order to ascertain if any certain clue could possibly be discovered to the fate of the writer of that letter.

CHAPTER XCVII.

A STRANGE GUEST AT OAKLANDS.

The Duke of Marchmont, as we have said, retired to his own chamber and locked himself in. But he did not seek his couch: he felt that it were useless to lay himself down thereon, for that he could not sleep. His soul had received a shock far more profound than even Wilson Stanhope himself had suspected at the time.

The Duke first of all examined the room carefully,—even condescending to look beneath the bed and behind all the draperies; and with an equal degree of scrutiny did he search the dressing-room adjoining. We have used the word *condescend* because it is ever a humiliating thing for a man to admit even unto himself that he is a coward; and with some haughty minds it is a difficult thing for them to bend to any proceeding that in itself proclaims their cowardice. But the Duke of Marchmont was indeed a coward now; and it was conscience that made him so.

Having completed the investigation of his bedchamber and the dressing-room adjoining, the Duke opened his pistol-case and proceeded to load the weapons. But in the midst of the operation he desisted: he pressed his hand to his brow—and murmured to himself, "If *he* be really alive, can I—can I do this?" and he glanced shudderingly at the pistols in the open case.

He threw himself upon a seat, and reflected profoundly. Slow but deep—gradual but strongly marked, were the workings of his countenance, as varied thoughts passed through his brain.

"What can all this mean?" he asked himself: "what omens are portended? Why was it that *she*—that eastern woman—came hither? and why does she seem to be taking up a cause with which she can have no earthly concern? And why does *he* haunt me now? Oh, would that I could persuade myself it were all a dream! But if she—that eastern lady—were removed from my path—and if *he*—*he* likewise ceased to exist—what cause of future apprehension would remain?"

The Duke rose from his seat, and slowly paced to and fro in the chamber. At length he halted at the table on which the pistol-case lay; and as if suddenly making up his mind, he muttered between his teeth, while his countenance assumed an air of fierce resolve, "Yes—by heaven! anything—no matter what—so long as I clear my path of those who dare plant themselves in it!"

The Duke then finished loading the pistols; and he deposited the case on a small table by the side of his bed.

"Now," he said, with a demoniac savageness settling for the instant upon his features, "*he* may come again if he will; and if it be in the corporeal substance that he comes—if it be as a living denizen of this world—by heaven, his next appearance shall be the last! Without compunction—without remorse, will I stretch him lifeless on the floor! No more pusillanimity on my part!—no more vain and idle terrors!—for it is only by my coward yielding to them that he has been encouraged to renew his pranks and endeavour to work upon my fears. Fool, fool that I was to betray myself in the presence of Stanhope! But it is for the last time. And now, despite his declaration that he washes his hands of the business I propose to him, he shall undertake it; and by rendering him criminal—by making him an accomplice, I shall cease to be at his mercy, as I now more or less am: for unfortunately the incident of this evening has given him an advantage over me."

The Duke of Marchmont endeavoured to persuade himself—or we might even say, strove hard to make himself feel that his mind was now composed and settled once again since he had resolved upon a particular course of action: but he could not shut out from his convictions that his soul had received a shock from which it was by no means so easy to recover. The sense that it was so, was brought all the more powerfully home to him when he began to disapparel himself for the purpose of seeking his couch; and then he suddenly stamped his foot with rage as he felt that he was afraid to go to bed! He walked to and fro—he sate down and took a book—he rose up again—his restlessness was increasing.

"But how could *he* have got there?" the Duke suddenly asked himself. "The door of the conservatory was locked—and no one could have entered the library or the billiard-room unperceived by at least some of the domestics. Ah!" ejaculated the Duke within himself; "if he were really there, then he must be there now! Egress was impossible!"

As this idea struck the Duke of Marchmont, a devilish notion at the same time flashed to his brain. He nerved himself with all his energy to carry it out: he forced upon himself the thought of how much depended upon it: his features grew rigid with desperate resoluteness—and he determined to do that which had just entered his head. Resuming the apparel which he had cast off, the Duke secured the pistols about his person; and taking a light, issued from his chamber.

He descended the staircase, and first of all entered the billiard-room. With the taper in one hand, and the other ready prepared to seize upon a pistol, the Duke searched the place—but found no one. He passed into the library: an equally rigid search was instituted there—and still no one. Thence he passed out into the conservatory—saying to himself, "Perhaps if I had only searched this place well at the time, I might have found him crouched behind one of the trees or in some dark nook."

It was no longer with the slightest scintillation of cowardice, but with a stern, dogged, savage resoluteness of purpose, that the Duke of Marchmont pursued his investigation here—but all to no effect. He examined the outer door—and it was fast locked, as when Wilson Stanhope had himself examined it.

"Can he be still in the house?" asked the Duke of himself: "or was it after all naught but an illusion?——or worse still, was it—was it a spirit from the other world?"

Now all in an instant his resoluteness melted away—a cold shudder ran through him—his looks were swept in recoiling terror around; and he felt as if the least indication of anything supernatural would crush and overpower him in a moment. A multitude of horrific fancies swept through his brain: his countenance was ghastly white; and he felt his heart beating with so painful a violence that it appeared as if he had just been abruptly awakened out of a hideous dream.

"Fool, fool that I am!" he said to himself: "at one instant bold to desperation!—at another the veriest coward that walks the face of the earth! Perhaps after all he is secreted elsewhere in the house: for how, *on that other occasion*, could he have procured admittance within these walls. By heaven, I will not rest till I have searched the place throughout!"

Again was the fortitude of the Duke of Marchmont returning; and he was about to issue from the conservatory to return into the library and thence regain the other part of the mansion,—when all of a sudden it struck him that he beheld a human countenance looking in at him through the glass. The taper nearly fell from his hand: the next instant the face was gone—but his ear distinctly caught the sound of rapidly retreating footsteps. Thus satisfied that it was indeed a living being, but having no particular idea of the appearance of that countenance which he had seen looking in upon him, the Duke hastened from the conservatory—sped through the library—and in a few moments reached the private door which was so frequently mentioned in earlier chapters of this narrative. Of this door he always had the key: he opened it—and leaving the taper in a recess, he rushed forth.

"Now, by heaven! if it is *he*," the Duke thought within his own breast—and he found himself nerved with an extraordinary strength of mind, or rather we should say, a satanic resoluteness of purpose,—"if it is *he*, death—death!"

He stopped and listened: the sounds of footsteps reached his ear from a particular direction; and thither he sped with a swiftness that amazed himself. He could however see nothing—for there was a thick fog: but he knew every inch of his own grounds well, and could thus keep to the gravel-walk even though rushing on at so fleet a pace. The retreating footsteps became more distinct. Marchmont then knew that he was in the vicinage of a grass-plot; and by transferring his route to the soft yielding turf, the sounds of his own steps were no longer audible.

All of a sudden the footsteps of the other ceased: then in a few minutes, they appeared to be coming hastily towards him; and the Duke stood still. Nearer came those steps: then they suddenly ceased again, as if the individual was stopping short to listen; and then they came on once more. The Duke of Marchmont had a pistol in each hand; and he was resolved to fire the very moment he should obtain the certainty that it was he whom he sought—he whom he feared—he whose life he had made up his mind to take! Nearer came the footsteps: they were advancing more slowly along the gravel-walk: they were heavy steps, as if they were clumsy shoes or coarse boots that were thus treading;—and Marchmont thought within himself, "It cannot after all be *he!*"

A few moments put an end to the Duke's uncertainty; for a figure was revealed to him through the mist; and he himself was simultaneously revealed to that individual.

"Hands off, whoever you are!" growled a ferocious voice: "or I'll dash your brains out—blow me if I don't!"

"Move not another inch," said the Duke, with stern intrepidity: "or I send a bullet through *your* brains!"

"I'm only a poor feller," responded the intruder, "which has lost his way in this cursed fog: and I didn't go for to do no harm."

"If that be the case," answered the Duke, "I will do you no harm either. But tell me—how came you to look into that conservatory just now?"

"Ah, well, I see you're the same gentleman which was in that place: but I wasn't after no ill. I saw the light—or should rather say, I came right bang agin the place in the midst of the fog, and should have gone smash through it glass and all, if so be that it wasn't for that there glim as you carried in your hand."

During this brief colloquy, the Duke of Marchmont had leisure to contemplate the intruder more narrowly as his eyes grew accustomed to the obscurity which prevailed. A suspicion arose in his mind; and another instant's scrutiny of that villanous hangdog countenance confirmed it. He now knew beyond any farther doubt who this man was; and it appeared to him as if he were suddenly thrown in his way in order to become an instrument in the carrying out of his designs.

"My poor fellow," he said, assuming the most compassionating voice, "you are evidently a houseless wanderer: and so far from blaming you for having involuntarily intruded on my grounds, I pity you. What can I do for you? Do you require food? and shall I show you a loft over the stable where you may rest yourself for the night? Be not afraid: I am the Duke of Marchmont—and I flatter myself that no poor man has ever had any reason to complain of harshness or unkindness on my part."

"I'm werry much obleeged to your lordship," was the intruder's response; "and if so be 'tisn't axing for too much at this time o' night for a meal of wittels, I should be uncommon thankful."

"Come with me, my poor man," replied the Duke, in the same compassionating voice as before; "and I will see what I can do for you. This way."

Marchmont acted as if he had not the slightest suspicion of the fellow's true character; and in this manner he conducted him towards the private door of the house. While proceeding thither, the ill-looking intruder eyed the nobleman askance, in order to penetrate his purpose and assure himself that he was really safe: but he saw nothing on the part of the Duke to make him apprehend any treachery. His circumstances were desperate: for though he had money in his pocket, yet he was well nigh famished, from the simple fact that he had not dared approach any habitation during the day, much less enter any village or hamlet, in order to purchase food. He accordingly resolved to accept the proffered kindness of the Duke: for he felt tolerably well convinced that he incurred no peril in so doing.

Marchmont conducted him over the threshold of the private door, which he immediately locked; and taking the taper from the recess, he led the way towards the servants' offices,—the ill-looking man following. Proceeding to the larder, the Duke said, "Take whatever you fancy: be not afraid—I do not things by halves."

The man lifted down a cold joint: another shelf supplied bread and cheese; and the Duke bade him bring the food into the servants' hall. Then his Grace showed him where to draw a jug of strong ale, and bade him sit down and eat. The man most readily and joyously obeyed: he placed himself at the table, and commenced a mighty inroad on the sirloin,—prefacing it however with a deep draught of the old October ale. The Duke sate down at a little distance; and without appearing to look towards his strange guest, was nevertheless contemplating him furtively the whole time.

"It's werry kind, my lord," said the man, "for a great nobleman like yourself to take such compassion on a poor hard-working feller which has had no work to do for the last month——"

"Eat and drink," interrupted Marchmont; "and give me your thanks afterwards. Do not be afraid of making inroads on the provisions: there is more meat in the larder, and there is more ale in the cask."

Thus encouraged, the ill-looking guest renewed his assault on the sirloin, and paid his respects to the ale. He ate with the voracity of one who had been foodless for many, many long hours—as was indeed the case. At length he laid down his knife and fork, and drained the jug.

"Now," said the Duke, "replenish that jug—for I must have some little discourse with you. I have already given you the assurance that I do not things by halves; and I must see if I can be of service to you for the future."

The man lost no time in refilling the jug from the barrel of old October; and returning to his seat, he nodded with a sort of respectful familiarity to the Duke, saying, "Here's wishing your Grace all 'ealth and 'appiness, and many years to enjoy them good things which you bestows on a poor honest Christian like myself."

The Duke made no response: but rising from his seat, shut the door of the servants' hall; and then returning to his chair, he said, "We must now have a few minutes' discourse."

There was something in the Duke of Marchmont's appearance — something which seemed altered in his manner, that the ill-looking guest did not altogether like. He looked around him—fidgetted on his chair for a moment—appeared inclined to take up his club, which lay near his battered hat at his feet—then flung a furtive glance at the Duke again—and then had recourse to the ale jug, as if thence to derive fortitude and encouragement. When he deposited it on the table again, he perceived that the Duke was regarding him in a peculiar manner.

"Do not be afraid," said Marchmont; "and do not start nor grow excited—much less attempt any violence—I mean you no harm—but in a word, I know who you are!"

The fellow *did* start despite the injunction to the contrary; and again he made a motion as if to snatch up his club: but the Duke, instantaneously displaying a pistol, said, "Look! you are at my mercy. But be quiet——I tell you again that I will do you no harm. In a word, you can serve me."

"Ah! that's different," exclaimed the fellow. "I always like to hear that my services is needed—cos why, it shows that everything is square and above board."

"Yes—I know you," continued the Duke: "I recognised you within a few instants after our encounter; and therefore you may judge whether I mean you a mischief, considering the way in which I have treated you. Your name is Barnes—and you are known as the Burker."

"Well, my lord, I don't deny them's my names, titles, and distinctions; and if so be they ain't quite so high and mighty as your own, they're all werry well in their own way. I come of a werry respectable family, my lord: most of my ancestors was great public characters, and went out of the world before the public gaze amidst werry great applause. I'm raytber proud on 'em, though I says it which shouldn't say it."

"Now that you have done this long tirade," said the Duke of Marchmont, "perhaps you will listen to me."

"But first of all, my lord," interrupted the Burker, "perhaps you will have the goodness to tell me how it was you recognised me. I know that I'm a genelman of much renown, and that people in certain quarters makes theirselves uncommon busy in looking arter me and prying into my consarns."

"A few words of explanation will suffice," responded the Duke, cutting short that garrulity which received its inspiration from the strength of the October ale. "There have been accurate personal descriptions given of you in newspaper-advertisements, placards, and handbills——"

"Ah! my lord, see what poppilarity is!" said the Burker: and he again had recourse to the ale jug.

We may here pause for an instant to explain that the Duke of Marchmont had at the time, for reasons known to the reader, taken a great interest in the trial of Lettice Rodney: he had therefore closely watched the newspapers in order to see whether anything transpired relative to Madame Angelique's establishment, or showed that there had been a connexion in any sort of way between Lettice Rodney and himself. Thus was it that the Duke had been led to read the personal description that was given of the Burker, when the result of the trial proved that he, Mrs. Webber, and another were the actual murderers of the Liverpool lawyer. The Duke had since thought more than once that Barney the Burker was an instrument for whom he could find employment: and thus was it that the personal description of the ruffian had remained so faithfully impressed upon his memory. Infinitely disgusted was his Grace now with the coarse flippant familiarity which the Burker displayed under the influence of the ale: for refined villany loathes vulgar villany, although there may be no shade of difference between the actual criminality of either, and although the former may condescend or feel itself necessitated to make use of the latter. But Marchmont did not choose to assume an overbearing manner, nor to betray his disgust too visibly to the ruffian whose services he was now resolved to put into requisition.

"I can well understand," he said, "how it is that you are a houseless wanderer and that your condition is so deplorable. There is a reward set upon your head; and your predicament is more than ever perilous after your most recent exploits with the police-officers at the house some where in the southern side of London. Now, if I were to

afford you the means of disguise and to give you money—if I were also to hold out to you a prospect of a much larger sum, so that you might escape out of the country and get to America or France, or go out to Australia—anything, in short——"

"Your lordship may command me in every way," exclaimed the Burker, his hideous hang-dog countenance testifying the utmost joy. "There's nothing I'd stick at to serve so kind a friend as your Grace offers to prove towards me."

"Well and fairly spoken," rejoined the Duke. "I do indeed require a most signal service at your hands; and if you fulfil it, all that I have promised shall be done."

We will not dwell any longer upon the conversation that took place between the Duke of Marchmont and his miscreant companion: suffice it to say that the latter fully comprehended the dark iniquitous business that was entrusted to him, and swore to accomplish it. The Duke ascended to his chamber, and there procured a small phial containing a dye for the complexion, a black wig with frizzy curls, and a false moustache,—these articles having been required by his Grace for some masquerading purpose several years back, and having since remained forgotten until now in some nook of his wardrobe. He then took from a cupboard a discarded suit of apparel, which by accident had not as yet passed as "a perquisite" into the hands of his valet; and descending with these things, the Duke of Marchmont rejoined the Burker whom he had left in the servants' hall. The ruffian speedily metamorphosed himself according to the instructions he received and the means placed at his disposal, and of which he availed himself with infinite satisfaction and delight. By the aid of a looking-glass he dyed his complexion with a portion of the liquid furnished by the phial; and the Duke informed him how, by the purchase of a few simple things at a chemist's, to form a similar decoction for future use. The appendage of the moustache concealed that peculiar formation of the Burker's upper lip which rendered him so easily recognisable; and the garments which the Duke supplied him, as well as the wig, aided in the accomplishment of the disguise. From amidst the quantity of boots and shoes which the male domestics of the establishment had left down-stairs to be cleaned by the underlings in the morning, Marchmont bade the Burker choose a pair that would fit him; and he did the same in respect to the hats that were suspended in the servants' hall. The Duke then placed a sum of money in the villain's hand—and bade him form a bundle of his own cast-off clothes, so that he might sink it in the first pond or stream he should reach.

All these matters being settled, the transmogrified Mr. Barnes took his departure from Oaklands; and the Duke of Marchmont returned to his own chamber.

"It was Satan's self," he thought within his own mind, "who threw this fellow in my way to-night! I can now dispense with the services of Stanhope,—which, after all, is an advantage: for he is more squeamish than I had fancied—whereas on the other hand this ruffian will do my business without compunction and without remorse. *Her* fate will soon be sealed; and now I have only to think what is to be done with regard to *him*—if indeed it be he himself in the living person, and not a spirit whom I have seen!"

CHAPTER XCVIII.

THE SAINT.

THE scene again shifts to London. In a well-furnished room at a beautiful little suburban villa, Mr. White Choker was seated upon a sofa with the mistress whom Madame Angelique had so kindly provided for him. This was Linda, the German beauty. She was dressed in an elegant *deshabillée*, consisting of a French muslin wrapper; and which, though it came up to the throat, nevertheless defined all the voluptuous proportions of her form. The rich masses of her auburn hair enframed her countenance with heavy bands, and were negligently knotted behind the well shaped head: for it was not yet mid-day and Linda's toilet had still to be accomplished.

Mr. White Choker was deeply enamoured of his beautiful mistress. Several days had now passed since he first became possessed of her: he firmly believed that she was *all but* virtuous when she came to his arms; and he was very far from suspecting that she was in the way to become a mother. On the occasion when we now find him seated by her side, he had only just arrived at the villa, where he had not passed the preceding night: for he could not too often adopt towards the wife of his bosom, the excellent Mrs. White Choker, the excuse "that he was going to keep a vigil of blessed prayer by the bed-side of a dear brother in the good work, who was lying at that extremity which was but the passport to the realms of eternal bliss."

Mr. White Choker was dressed in precisely the same style as when we first introduced him to the reader,—a black suit—a white neckcloth, displaying no collar—shoes and stockings, the former with very large bows;—while a capacious cotton umbrella kept company with his low-crowned hat which he had deposited on the carpet. How is it that all "saints" carry cotton umbrellas? A "saint" evidently does not consider himself perfect without such an appendage. However rich he may be, you will never see him with a silk umbrella: it is always a cotton one. If you peep into Exeter Hall, a glance will soon satisfy you that all the umbrellas which tap upon the floor at some peculiarly refreshing portion of the speaker's discourse, are stout cotton ones, and there shall not be a single silk one amongst them. A cotton umbrella is as inseparable from a gentleman "saint" as a brandy flask is from a lady "saint;" and perhaps there is an equal number of both umbrellas and flasks at every meeting at Exeter Hall or any other resort of the sanctimonious.

But to return to our narrative. Mr. White Choker sate upon the sofa next to Linda; and having toyed for some little while with her, he began to notice that the expression of her countenance was pensive even to mournfulness.

"Tell me, my dear girl," he said, in that whining canting tone which from long habit he now invariably adopted, so that even his professions of love were conveyed in an Exeter Hall snivel,—"tell me, my dear girl, what oppresses your mind? If you have secret woes, let your loving friend Choker share them: for when you smile, Choker shall smile—and when you weep, the faithful Choker shall weep likewise."

Two pearly tears were now trickling down Linda's cheeks; and Mr. White Choker, perceiving the same, thought it expedient to kiss them away in the first instance, and then to get up a little sympathetic snivel of his own in the second instance. In so doing, he pulled out his white kerchief; and, behold! a bundle of Tracts fell upon the floor. They were the newly published effusions of one of the most savoury vessels and most influential members of the Foreign Cannibal-Reclaiming, Negro-Christianising, and Naked-Savage-Clothing Society; and on receiving them that very morning, Mr. White Choker had assured his trusting and pious wife that he would hasten off to distribute them amongst the "benighted:" but instead of doing anything of the sort, he had sped, as we have seen, to the villa which he had hired for his mistress.

"But tell me, my dearest Linda," said Mr. White Choker, when he fancied he had gone through a sufficient process of snivelling, and turning up the whites of his eyes, and sighing and groaning, "tell me, my love, what it is that ails you? If you have any remorse for the life you are leading, set your mind at ease: for the good that I do in the world more than compensates for any *leetle* indiscretion or weakness of which I may be guilty; and the cloak of my sanctity covereth thee also, my dear sister——But hang it! I am not on the platform now! I really thought I was for the moment. Come, Linda dear, tell your own faithful Choker what it is that afflicts you; and he will do everything that lies in his power to contribute to your happiness."

"How can I ever tell you the truth?" said

Linda, sobbing and weeping,—"you who are so kind and good to me!"

"You speak, my love, as if you had deceived me in some way or another," said the sanctimonious gentleman; and his countenance grew considerably elongated. "Pray be candid: let me know the worst, whatever it is—yea, let me know the worst,"

"It is true," continued Linda, now wringing her hands, "that in one sense you have been deceived——I mean that something has been kept back——"

"What? what?" asked Mr. White Choker, fidgeting very uneasily upon his seat. "Madame Angelique told me you had only been once astray——"

"Ah! it was not in this that you were deceived, my dear friend," replied the weeping Linda: "for that was true enough. Oh! I never can tell you!"

"But you must, my dear—you must let me know the entire truth," said Mr. White Choker. "I can't conceive what you mean—I can't understand what it is you have got to tell. But pray be candid. You don't know what a fidget this uncertainty keeps me in: I am all over with a tremble. You don't think Snufflenose suspects——"

"No, nothing of that sort," responded Linda. "It is not any of *your* acquaintances——"

"Then some of your own?" hastily suggested Mr. White Choker. "Oh! my dear, how could you have been so indiscreet? Don't you know that I am a blessed saint, and that if the odour of my sanctity once became tainted by the breath of scandal——Oh, dear me! dear me: what would they say of me at Exeter Hall?"

"I am very, very unhappy," sobbed Linda, who appeared as if her heart would break: "and I wish I had never accepted your protection—for I am afraid——"

"Afraid of what?" asked the saint, still in a feverish excitement.

"That if my husband were only to dicover——"

"Your husband?"—and Mr. White Choker suddenly put on such a look of blank despair that his appearance was perfectly ludicrous.

Seized with consternation, overcome with dismay, and picturing to himself actions for *crim. con.* and all sorts of evils, the unfortunate gentleman rolled off the sofa and tumbled over his stout cotton umbrella and his broad-brimmed hat. Then, as he afterwards expressed himself, he groaned in spirit: and wished that he had rather become the companion of Esquimaux and white bears of the North Pole, or of benighted cannibals in the islands of the South Pacific, than have remained in the more salubrious and civilized region of his birth to have fallen in with a married woman. Linda besought the saint to pick himself up: but as he exhibited no inclination to do anything of the sort, but only lay sprawling and groaning on the floor, with his head crushing his hat and his nose rubbing against his cotton umbrella, the considerate young lady thought she had better try her own hand at picking him up. The saint suffered himself to be over-persuaded; and pressing Linda in his arms, he covered her with kisses,—groaning and whining most fearfully for no less a period than five minutes.

"And now tell me," he said, in a voice as if it were a schoolboy whimpering over a task that he could not work out,—"tell me all about this, my dear. How came you to be married? where is your husband? who is he? Is he a godly man? hath he the fear of the Lord before his eyes? But d—n him, whoever he is!"—and Mr. White Choker gave utterance to this ejaculation with an unction and emphasis which proved the sincerity with which this most unsaint-like malediction was expressed.

"If you will listen to me," said Linda, who still continued to sob and weep somewhat, "I will tell you all about it. You know I am a native of Germany. My father and mother were genteel people, living at Manheim; and about three years ago an English gentleman was stopping at the hotel exactly facing our residence. He became acquainted with us, and visited us frequently. He was very rich—a Captain in a Hussar regiment——"

Linda started as if a voice from the dead had suddenly spoken in her ear: for Mr. White Choker gave a groan so deep and hollow that it was really no wonder the young lady was thus terrified. A captain of Hussars! Good heavens, that his malignant planets should have possibly opened the way to throw him in contact with such a vessel of wrath, as the saint considered every military officer to be! A captain of Hussars. Why, he would sooner face all the Snufflenoses in the world—he would sooner have a committee of inquiry appointed by his Society to investigate his character, with the certainty that such committee should consist of all his sworn enemies—than stand the chance of facing a captain of Hussars! He would sooner be scourged thrice round Hyde Park than encounter such an individual! In a word, an hour in the pillory, and being pelted the while with rotten eggs, were a pleasant little pastime in comparison with the risk of being called to an account by a captain of Hussars!

"Pray, my dearest friend, do not make yourself so miserable," said Linda, plying all her little artifices and wiles, all her wheedlings and coaxings, and all her cajoleries to appease him somewhat. "I am very sorry——I was going to have told you the whole truth——but the instant I saw you, I conceived such an affection for you that I was afraid if you heard I was married——"

"Ah, well-a-day! the mischief is done, my dear," groaned Mr. White Choker. "Love is the forbidden fruit—and you are the Eve that tempted this wretched Adam"—and he slapped his breast —"to fall."

"Let me continue my narrative," said Linda, with one arm thrown round his neck. "This Captain—pray don't groan so—this Captain of Hussars——What? another groan?——Well, I must call him, then, by the name of Cartwright. Though many years older than myself, he sought me as his bride. I did not love him: I hated him from the very instant that I perceived his attentions began to grow marked. On the other hand my parents encouraged his addresses: he boasted of his wealth—he lived in good style—and they thought that such an alliance would be ensuring an excellent position for their daughter. It is the old tale: the child was sacrificed to the wishes of the parents—and I became the bride of the Hussar Captain——I mean of Cartwright," Linda hastily added; for another sepulchral groan came up from the cavern-like depths of Mr. White Choker's throat.

She paused for a few minutes, during which she seemed to be sobbing bitterly; while the saint rocked himself to and fro, groaning each time he went backward, and whining each time he went forward: so that what with the alternations of the groan and the whine he made as sweet a music as ever emanated from the human throat.

"Three years have elapsed since that fatal marriage," proceeded Linda, in a low and mournful voice: "but only for one year did I live with that man. He treated me cruelly—he beat me——Oh! you have no idea of his dreadful violence—the infuriate gusts of passion——"

Another terrific groan escaped from Mr. White Choker's lips: his countenance was ghastly—he quivered and shivered in every limb. Visions of horse-whips and horse-pistols, of writs for *crim. con.*, of tribunals filled with big-wigs, of heavy damages, of columns of scandal in the newspapers, of Exeter Hall consternation, of select committees of inquiry, whirled around him as if Pandora's box had just been opened under his very nose and all the evils it contained were about to settle upon him like the plague of locusts. And amidst them all was the hideous countenance of Snufflenose, his great rival and arch-enemy in the sphere of saintdom, grinning maliciously at him. Unhappy Mr. White Choker! what was he to do?

"Yes," continued Linda, "at the expiration of a year I was compelled to leave that dreadful man —and I returned to my parents. He followed me —he told them such tales that they would not believe otherwise than that I myself was in fault, and that he himself was an angel of goodness, kindness, and virtue. They insisted that I should return to him; and in order to avoid such a dreadful fate, I fled from home, I came to England, and obtained a situation as governess in a highly respectable family: but my husband found me out and I was compelled to fly once more. I went to Paris, where I obtained another situation; and it was during one of Madame Angelique's temporary visits to the French capital that I happened to fall in with her. I believed her to be a highly respectable lady; and she begged me if ever I returned to London, to favour her with a call. I promised that I would. My husband came to Paris: I heard persons speaking of him—I learnt that he was ruined—that he was leading a terribly wild life: I hoped therefore that caring no longer for me, he might desist from his persecutions. But no such thing. He found me out—he insisted upon my returning to him—and again was I compelled to fly."

"And what did you do then, my poor dear Linda?" asked Mr. White Choker, with another deep lugubrious groan.

"Believing that my husband's debts rendered it unlikely that he would revisit England, I sped back to London, where I soon obtained another situation as governess. But my evil genius haunted me. A few weeks ago my husband reappeared; and again was I compelled to flee from a happy home. I was reduced to despair; and in an evil hour I encountered Madame Angelique. She invited me to her house—I went—its true character soon became known to me—she introduced a gentleman——and—and—from necessity I fell. I saw no one else until I came under your protection."

"And that *one* gentleman," said Mr. White Choker, shaking his head solemnly: "who is he? Some dashing young spark——"

"No—an elderly gentleman," responded Linda: "and I did hear it whispered that he was some high dignitary of the Church."

"Ah! then, my dear, there was no harm—no harm at all," said Mr. White Choker. "The sanctity of an individual glosses over any little failing. But about this terrible husband of your's ——Dear me! dear me! if I had known all this——"

"Ah! it is the idea of that husband of mine which makes me wretched!" moaned Linda.

"And you are almost sure that he will find you out—are you not, my dear girl?" inquired Mr. White Choker, quivering from head to foot.

"Let us hope not," responded Linda, suffering her countenance to assume a more cheerful aspect. "You will not desert me on that account——Oh! tell me that you will not desert me?"

But scarcely were the words spoken, when a terrific knock at the front door thundered through the house—the bell at the same time rang as franctically as if pulled by a lunatic just escaped out of Bedlam—and Mr. White Choker felt as if he were shrivelling up into nothing. But the next instant a thought struck this saint-like man: the instinct of self-preservation asserted all its power within him: a luminous notion inspired him.

"My dear girl—my dear sweet Linda," he said, "listen to me attentively. Look as pious, as holy, and as contrite as you can. Verily, we must clothe ourselves with the raiment of hypocrisy as the only armour wherewith to defend ourselves against him who cometh like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Ah! I hear his footsteps! Perdition and the devil take him. But no, no—that is not what I meant!"

Quick as lightning Mr. White Choker scud across the room as if a mad dog were at his heels; and partially opening the door, he flew back to his seat. Then he began to address Linda in a strain which for the first few instants filled her with a perfect astoundment.

"My dear sister in the good cause," said the saint, with the most approved commingling of snuffle and whine, whimper and snivel,—"yea, verily, we are all sinful creatures—we are all sheep that have strayed from the pasture. It is good, my sister, that I who am a man known in the tabernacles of the pious, and reputed to be a savoury vessel against which no scandal has ever dared breathe a whisper, should in this true brotherly fashion visit you from time to time. It is sweet, my sister, that we should sing hymns together; and anon I will expound unto you that text concerning which we were speaking just now. Well pleased am I to reckon you amongst the sheep of our fold; and you, my sister, will feel your soul refreshed by an attentive listening unto my discourse. Ah! my sweet sister, it is pleasant to escape from the vanities of this wicked world—to buckle on the armour of truth——"

"By heaven! it must be precious stout armour that will prevent me from lacerating your precious hide in such a way that your own mother shall not know you!"

Mr. White Choker felt as if he had been suddenly turned into a snowball and was rapidly melting away. The ferocious Cartwright strode into the room with clenched fists and a countenance convulsed with rage. He was dressed in plain clothes: but his moustache seemed fiercer, if possible, than even when he had burst into the presence of Mr. Softly, or of Lord Wenham. Linda shrieked and covered her face with her hands. Mr. White Croker was confounded on finding that his beautiful homily had produced no earthly effect; his countenance was ghastly—he wished that the earth would open and swallow him up. But the flooring of the house appeared by no means disposed to achieve any such spontaneous miracle for his especial behoof, all saint though he were.

"You vile woman!" vociferated Captain Cartwright: "so I have found you out again? But *this* time in what a position! Not earning your bread honestly as a teacher of the young idea how to shoot—but as the mistress of this hypocritical old vagabond. And talking about shooting, you shall very soon see if I won't try my hand at it. What do you mean, sir, going about seducing men's wives with that precious white choker round your throat?"

"My good friend—my worthy sir—my gallant Captain," stammered forth Mr. White Choker, "this dear lady is as pious a vessel——"

"Silence!" roared Captain Cartwright; "or I will very soon show you that your head is a vessel to be broken into a dozen pieces."

"But, my dear sir," resumed the wretched saint, "this is really too outrageous. I am a man respected in the congregations and of good odour in the tabernacles——"

"Such tabernacles as Madame Angelique's house of infamy!" exclaimed Captain Cartwright: "for there you were the other day—and there you met my wife. I can prove it. My lawyers can prove it. A highly respectable firm, sir——Catchflat, Sharply, Rumrig, Downy, and Co., Lincoln's Inn Fields——and if you don't see their names at the back of a writ, laying damages at five thousand pounds, in the course of this very day, then my name is not Hannibal Cæsar Napoleon Cartwright."

The miserable Mr. White Choker, who had risen from his seat, sank back again in perfect dismay at hearing those separate strings of names. The appellations of the legal firm denoted all the chicaneries of the law: the appellations of the gallant plaintiff himself denoted all his bellicose propensities. Meanwhile Linda, sitting apart, kept her countenance covered with her hands, and seemed as if she dared not so much as even steal a furtive glance at her husband, nor put forth a single syllable in appeal for his mercy. But a sudden idea struck Mr. White Choker: his only resource was to ride it with a high hand; and though it required a very desperate effort to screw up his courage to such a point, yet the circumstances of the case enabled him so to do. It was a sort of neck-or-nothing crisis—one of those emergencies which give energy to the veriest coward.

Rising up from his seat, he advanced a pace or two towards the ferocious Captain—but taking good care to pick up his cotton umbrella, so as to be in readiness to resist any sudden attack; and assuming a look sanctimoniously firm and deprecatingly virtuous, he said, "The character of a good and well-meaning man is not to be aspersed in this style. Peradventure I did verily go to the abode of the woman whom you call Madame Angelique: but it was for the blessed purpose of reclaiming those sheep which had strayed from the fold——"

"And so you take one of the sheep," vociferated the Captain, "and put her into a handsomely furnished villa?"

"Yea, verily—to reclaim her," responded Mr. White Choker, now speaking with a degree of assurance that astonished himself. "My visits hither have had the most godly purpose. It has been to reason with her on the past—to preach savoury homilies unto her—to infuse refreshing doctrines into her soul——"

"And these precious homilies of your's are so long," retorted the Captain, with a ferocious sneer, "that you have to pass the whole night with her at times—eh?"

"Prove it—I defy you to prove it!" ejaculated Mr. White Choker, his assurance heightening into effrontery through the very desperation of his position: and he moreover flattered himself that he could place implicit reliance on the fidelity of the servants belonging to the villa.

"Now look you, Mr. Saint, or whatever you are," exclaimed the Captain, "it is all very well for you to assume an air of innocence: but you are safe caught in a trap. I know everything. You won't have a leg to stand upon if you go into a court of justice; and you'll have Mrs. White Choker and all the little Chokers pointing their indignant fingers at a bad husband and a worthless father."

"We shall see," said the saint gruffly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself to go on in this manner before your virtuous wife. Speak to her, sir—she will tell you of what holy and blessed nature our intercourse has been, so that not even have we gone as far as to exchange the chaste kiss of peace."

"Linda," said Captain Cartwright, now speaking in a tone of mournful reproach, "you imagine that you have had wrongs to complain of at my hands. But my fault has been in loving you all too well——"

"Oh, do not speak to me! I cannot endure it!" cried the weeping Linda. "I feel—oh! I feel that I have wronged you much—that I have exaggerated your little ebullitions of temper——"

"Confess that you have dishonoured me!" said the Captain: "throw yourself upon your knees at my feet and reveal everything. It will be some atonement——"

"Linda my love—Mrs. Cartwright, I mean—dear sister in the blessed cause I would say," stammered out Mr. White Choker, now affrighted, wretched, and discomfited once again, "you would not betray me——I mean—I mean, you would not say anything against me—or tell an untruth——"

"Linda," broke in Captain Cartwright, "I command you to speak with frankness! On what terms are you living with this man? Are you not his mistress?"

"Oh, I must tell the truth!—this is dreadful!"

shrieked forth Linda: "but I must tell the truth!"—then falling on her knees at Captain Cartwright's feet, she said, "Yes—it is so——Alas! that I must confess it! But deal mercifully with *him*—he has treated me well——"

"Enough," said the Captain, giving a terrific twirl to his moustache. "Rise, Linda, and compose yourself. You at least have made by this confession all the atonement that was in your power; and though henceforth everything is at an end between us——"

Captain Cartwright stopped short; and turning abruptly round, seemed to be wiping away his tears with a scented cambric handkerchief. Linda rose from her knees; and not daring to throw a single glance upon Mr. White Choker, she sank on a chair apparently convulsed with grief. As for the saint himself, he stood the very picture of wretchedness and misery: but yet there was something ludicrous in the expression of his woe-begone countenance.

"Sir," said Captain Cartwright, advancing towards him, "what reparation can you make me for having torn an angel from my arms?"

"My good friend—my very dear friend," faltered the saint, "I—I—don't think you could have missed the angel very much—seeing that she has long been absent from your arms——"

"She would have come back, sir—and I should have received her were she not thus polluted! But enough of this trifling," ejaculated the Captain, with a fierce sternness. "Will you dare deny any longer that this lady—my wife—is your mistress? Come, sir, speak out, or by heaven——"

"Pray, pray don't use any violence," implored the wretched Mr. White Choker. "I—I confess that appearances are against me: but—but—for the sake of my family, whom I have brought up as savoury vessels, having the fear of the Lord before their eyes——"

"Sir, I myself am a Christian," interrupted Captain Cartwright, "and I can forgive so far as forgiveness be possible. But you must confess, sir——"

"Well, well, I confess—and—and—if five hundred or a thousand pounds—will—will—hush up this little matter—and make all things pleasant——"

At that moment footsteps were heard coming from the landing: an individual, with an air of jaunty self-sufficiency, and very gaily dressed, made his appearance, the door having continued ajar the whole time. Mr. White Choker was now perfectly aghast: for the conviction smote him that a witness had overheard everything that had taken place; and he might have been knocked down with a straw when Captain Cartwright said, "This, sir, is Mr. Downy, a member of the legal firm of which I have spoken."

Mr. Downy closed the door; and seating himself at the table, drew forth a bundle of papers, tied round with red tape, and of that ominous length, fold, and general appearance, which seemed to indicate that all the moral tortures of the law might be wielded at the discretion of this gentleman.

"A very painful business, Mr. Choker—a very painful business," said Mr. Downy. "Sorry to be compelled to serve process on a pious gentleman like yourself. But it can't be helped. If saints will be sinners, you know—ha! ha!—they must take the consequences. Let me see," continued the legal gentleman, as he proceeded to fill up a long slip of parchment and then arranged a corresponding slip of ordinary paper to be likewise filled up. "Here's the original—and here's the copy. Damages five thousand—eh, Captain?"

"Not a farthing less, sir!" responded Cartwright fiercely, as if he were offended that there could even be a doubt as to the price that he put upon the angel he had lost.

"Very good, Captain," said Mr. Downy: "damages five thousand. You hear, Mr. Choker? I keep the original: where shall I serve the copy? Will you take it? or will you refer me to your solicitors? or shall I just leave it at your own house as I pass by the door presently? It will be no trouble: I will give it into Mrs. Choker's own hand—and none of the servants will know anything about it. The trial will come on in November—Court of Common Pleas. Ah! it will be a rare excitement, as sure as my name is honest Ike——I mean Downy."

The reader may conceive the awful state of mind into which Mr. White Choker was thrown by these terrible proceedings. Five thousand pounds damages—a writ ready drawn out—and the whole affair certain to obtain a fearful publicity in the course of the day! The miserable saint looked at Mr. Downy, but beheld not the least encouragement in the insolently leering expression of his countenance. He looked at the Captain: but this gallant officer of Hussars was twirling his fierce moustache with the sternest resoluteness of purpose. He looked towards Linda: but that fallen angel whose departed virtue was appraised at five thousand pounds, was still covering her features with her hands and sobbing convulsively. Mr. White Choker turned up his eyes to the ceiling, and gave vent to a hollow groan. Mr. Downy, approaching him with an air of jaunty familiarity, held the ominous copy of the writ between his finger and thumb: and as if suddenly recollecting something, he said, "By the bye, there will be one witness we shall want—and perhaps, Mr. Choker, you would have no objection to give me his address——I mean Mr. Snufflenose."

This was the crowning stone of the entire fabric of Mr. White Choker's misery. Snufflenose of all persons, as a witness against him! He was now desperate. Clutching Mr. Downy by the lappel of his coat, he dragged him aside,—hastily whispering with nervous agitation, "For heaven's sake get this settled! Pray save me from exposure—I could not survive it. It would be my death! Only conceive, a man in my position to be dragged before a tribunal! Talk to the Captain—offer him a sum—implore him to be reasonable——"

"Look you here, Mr. Choker," said Mr. Downy, drawing the saint into a window-recess: "I am not a harsh man—and our firm is above pressing on a case for mere paltry costs. You will do well to settle it: for it is a terrible black affair—beats 'Higgins *versus* Wiggins' all to smashes, and 'Biggins *versus* Sniggins' all to shivers. Come, you're pretty warm—ha! ha! ha!—warm in two ways," chuckled Mr. Downy, who seemed of a jocular disposition; "warm in love and warm in purse. Now then, what shall we say? Three thousand?"

"Three thousand?" groaned Mr. White Choker, with a countenance uncommonly blank. "It's a very large sum——"

"Yes; but the injury inflicted is very large also," responded Mr. Downy. "Take my advice—it's only six and eightpence you know;"—and here the facetious gentleman chuckled again. "Don't haggle at a few pounds. To settle it for three thousand, and a fifty pound note for my costs, will be dirt cheap. In fact, between you and me and the post," added Mr. Downy, in a mysteriously confidential whisper, "the Captain will be a cursed fool if he settles it at all. He's got a capital case—a capital case. Why, sir, it beats cock-fighting."

Mr. Downy evidently thought that this last argument was a smasher; and poor Mr. White Choker was too miserably bewildered to discern any incongruity in the metaphor. He pleaded hard for Mr. Downy to reduce the demand to a couple of thousand: but the legal gentleman was obstinate. At length he said, "Well, I must see what I can do. I have a great respect for a pious man like yourself; and I shouldn't like to see you driven out of society, and poor Mrs. White Choker drowning herself in the Serpentine, leaving all the little Chokers to misery and wretchedness. No, no—that isn't the way business is done by honest Ike Shad——Mr. Downy, I mean, of the eminent firm of Catchflat, Sharply, Rumrig, and Co."

With these words the pseudo-lawyer—whom our readers have had no difficulty in recognising as an old acquaintance—accosted Captain Cartwright, and drew him aside. Mr. White Choker kept groaning inwardly, as he watched them with most anxious suspense. For several minutes Mr. Downy appeared to be pleading very energetically on the saint's behalf, so far as could be judged from his gesticulations: while the Captain seemed to be listening with a stern and dogged resoluteness. At length this gallant gentleman, as if growing impatient, exclaimed vehemently, "No, not one farthing less! Serve the writ, Mr. Downy."

"No, no!" cried the wretched saint imploringly: "let us settle it at once—anyhow!"

"It's the best thing you can do, my dear Sir," hastily whispered Mr. Downy, as he again accosted the unfortunate Mr. White Choker. "Sit down and draw the cheque—three thousand and fifty guineas."

"Pounds," said the miserable victim.

"*Guineas!*" rejoined Mr. Downy emphatically. "The Captain will only treat with guineas as a basis: that is his ultimatum."

Mr. White Choker gave another deep groan, it being about the six hundredth that had come up from his cavern-like throat on this memorable day: but resigning himself to his fate, he sate down and drew up the cheque according to dictation.

"And now," said Mr. Downy, "we will pitch these things into the grate:"—and he tore up the writs, both original and copy, into infinitesimal pieces, for fear lest they should be collected in order to form the groundwork of a prosecution for conspiracy to extort money under false pretences.

Having written the cheque, Mr. White Choker's mind became relieved of a considerable load; and he looked towards the chair which Linda had occupied a few moments back. But she was gone: she had flitted from the room.

"And now good morning to you, Sir," said Captain Cartwright. "For your own sake you will keep this business as secret as possible."

"Good bye, old fellow," said Mr. Downy, with a singular leer upon his countenance. "You behaved uncommon well after all; and you'll bless the moment you listened to the advice of honest Ike Shadbolt."

The Captain and his acolyte passed out of the room, closing the door behind them. For a few instants Mr. White Choker sate bewildered. A suspicion had flashed to his mind: its growth was marvellously rapid: it amounted to a certainty—he saw that he was done. He started up to his feet: he stood for an instant—and then he rushed to the door. Just as he opened it, he heard a sort of titter or giggle in a female voice. Was it possible?—the musical voice of his Linda! She was descending the stairs with the two men. Mr. Choker was on the very point of shouting out "Stop, thieves!" when it struck him that he would be thereby provoking the very scandal and exposure which he had paid so heavily to avoid. He dashed his hand against his forehead, and gave vent to a curse bitter enough to electrify ten thousand Exeter Hall audiences if there had been so many and if they had happened to hear it. He rushed to the window: and lo! he beheld Captain Cartwright gallantly handing Linda into a cab,—both of them evidently in the highest possible spirits. As for Mr. Downy—or honest Ike Shadbolt, as he had proclaimed himself to be—he was almost convulsed with laughter; and looking up towards the window, he waved his hand with the most impudent familiarity at Mr. White Choker. The cab drove off at a rattling pace; and we need hardly inform the reader that its first destination was the establishment of the saint's bankers in order to get the cheque cashed.

Mr. Choker, on beholding the vehicle thus disappear, rushed up stairs to Linda's chamber; and a glance at its condition showed him that she had carried off all the jewels and valuables which he had presented to her. A similar research in the dining-room made the saint painfully aware that the handsome service of plate he had bought for her use, had likewise disappeared. He threw himself on a sofa—buried his head in the cushions—moaned and groaned—swore and snivelled—whined and whimpered—and wished himself at the hottest place he could think of, and in the society of a personage whose name must not be mentioned to polite ears.

But the cup of his humiliations and miseries, though full enough, heaven knows! was yet to be made to overflow. The servants, consisting of a footman and three females, had got something more than an inkling of what had passed: for they had been carefully listening on the stairs. Accordingly, these amiable beings, on whose trustworthiness the saint had flattered himself he could so implicitly rely, suddenly made their appearance in a posse, and requested to know his intentions. With affrighted looks he intimated his purpose to pay them their wages at once and decline their farther services. The footman, as spokesman, made sundry and divers demands for compensation in lieu of proper notice; and he pretty plainly intimated that something in the shape of hush-money must likewise be forthcoming. To all these demands Mr. Choker found himself compelled to submit; and it cost him a pretty penny to purchase the silence of those individuals. The villa was given up that very day; and Mr. White Choker returned into the bosom of his family a wiser if not a better man. But the next time he attended the committee of the Foreign Cannibal-Reclaiming, Negro-Christianising, and Naked-Savage-Clothing Society, he for a long time sate on thorns for fear lest the affair should have got wind. As Snufflenose was however silent, Mr. Choker gathered courage: but for many a long day afterwards he groaned as he walked about—and at night his excellent better half fancied that he must be troubled with indigestion because of the restlessness of his dreams.

CHAPTER XCIX.

THE CHATEAU.

The scene now changes to the south of France.

In the neighbourhood of one of those beautiful villages which ornament the valleys on the outskirts of the Pyrenees, stood a large, old-fashioned, rambling, dark brick edifice, known as the Chateau. It had originally belonged to a noble and ancient family which had emigrated during the troubles of the first revolution; and that family had become extinct in a foreign clime. The Chateau was once the centre of a spacious and fair domain: but this had become parcelled out into small farms and allotments—so that at the time of which we are writing—namely, a few years back—the lands which had once constituted the domain of a single individual were in the possession of at least a score of different proprietors.

The Chateau itself had long been shut up; and with only the garden remaining attached to it, it had become the property of a lawyer in the adjacent village. Having been neglected for a great number of years, the building had sustained considerable injury; and the lawyer, finding it difficult to obtain a wealthy tenant, had felt by no means inclined to lay out money in repairing a place which seemed destined to remain empty. It was only fitted from its dimensions for the occupation of a wealthy family having a large establishment of servants; but no family of such means was likely to take a mansion that had such a small patch of land attached, and this surrounded by the allotments of poor proprietors. Besides, it would have required thousands of pounds to furnish the Chateau suitably; and as no rich family would think of burying themselves entirely in that seclusion, but would assuredly pass at least a moiety of the year in the gay capital, it was equally improbable that any one would incur such an enormous expense to furnish the Chateau as a mere temporary residence for a few months at a time. It must likewise be observed that superstition had lent its aid to render the old Chateau all the more difficult to let; and thus, as we have said, for many long years it had remained empty.

At length, some five years previous to the date which our story has reached, an elderly French gentleman, accompanied by his daughter, and attended only by one female domestic, arrived in the neighbouring village—where they took lodgings for a few weeks. We will presently describe them more particularly. Suffice it for the present to say that M. Volney—for this was the gentleman's name—began to make inquiries about the Chateau; and after some little negotiation with the lawyer, he took it. Everybody in the village was surprised: for there were several small and picturesque houses to let in the neighbourhood, any one of which would have been large enough for the accommodation of so small a family as the Volneys. But on the other hand, the Chateau was to be let at a rental less than even that of either one of the houses just alluded to; and it was therefore conjectured that this might be a consideration with a man whose means were evidently exceedingly limited. Indeed, the rent asked of him for the Chateau was to be little more than a mere nominal sum for the first term of seven years. Superstition, as we have already said, had given the Chateau a bad name; and the lawyer to whom it belonged, naturally anxious to improve his property by amending its repute, calculated that if respectable people lived in it for a period, its former character as a haunted house would be forgotten. And then, too, M. Volney undertook to make certain repairs, as well as to restore the garden: and thus, under all these circumstances, the lawyer was well enough contented with a comparatively nominal rental.

On the other hand, the Chateau seemed to suit M. Volney's disposition and frame of mind—and according to conjecture, his pecuniary means likewise. He was a man bordering upon sixty at the time when we purpose to introduce him to our reader. Somewhat above the middle height, he was thin; and though still in possession of full activity of limb, yet his pace was invariably slow, as if measured according to the solemn gloom of his thoughts. His countenance was pale with the evidences of some deeply seated sorrow indelibly stamped upon it. His gaze was cold and searching: no one at the first glance, or at the first meeting with M. Volney, would become prepossessed in his favour. His manners were as cold as his looks: there was something in them which repelled an advance towards friendship, and seemed to render an intimacy impossible. He spoke but little—never unnecessarily—and as much as possible in mere monosyllables. Yet despite that glacial gaze—that freezing manner—that undisguised dislike for conversation, there was an unmistakeable air of good breeding about M. Volney—that gloss of the courtly drawing-room which when once it invests the individual, can seldom be shaken off, any more than a talented person can by ordinary circumstances be rendered stupid or a well-educated one can become ignorant.

M. Volney was in the habit of taking long solitary walks; and yet it could scarcely be for the sake of the beautiful surrounding scenery, inasmuch as the sense of that or of any other enjoyment appeared to be dead within him. When he was encountered by any one of the rural inhabitants in those walks, he was invariably proceeding at the slow measured pace we have already alluded

CLARINE AND ZOE.

to—his eyes were bent down—and his whole demeanour indicated a deep pre-occupation of the thoughts. If out of respect the rustics saluted him as they passed, he would just acknowledge the compliment with a cold courtesy, in which however nothing of pride seemed blended: but he never stopped to exchange a syllable of conversation. When indoors, he was principally occupied in a little room which he had fitted up as a study or library, and the shelves of which contained a few books—but these of a sterling description. They consisted chiefly of scientific works, voyages, and travels, with a small sprinkling of the best French poets. There, in that study, M. Volney would pass hours together: though whether he were always reading, or whether he were much of that time communing with his own painful thoughts, was scarcely known even to his own daughter.

This lady was, at the period when we propose to introduce her to our readers, about two and twenty years of age. She was not above the middle stature—somewhat full in figure, but of good symmetry. She was neither handsome nor beautiful: but at the same time she might be pronounced good-looking. A profusion of dark brown hair—brows somewhat strongly pencilled—large hazel eyes—lips that were full and pouting, but not coarse—together with a splendid set of teeth,—these may be rapidly summed up as her leading personal characteristics. Her nose was not perfectly straight: it had a slight, but very slight downward inflexion, though not to the extent that warranted the application of the French term *retroussée.* Her countenance was the least thing too much rounded to be consonant with perfect beauty; and there was even something sensuous in the configuration of the chin as well as in the formation of the mouth. Yet such was not the impression that would remain upon the mind of an observer in respect to her character; inasmuch as her eyes beamed only with innocence—her manners were modest and retiring—and her bearing was replete with a becoming lady-like dignity. Such was Clarine Volney, at the age of twenty-two.

The female servant who originally accompanied the father and daughter to that neighbourhood, was a middle-aged woman, of respectable and matronly appearance. She had evidently been long in the family; for she regarded Clarine with that degree of affection which is shown by faithful domestics who have known young people from their birth, and in their childhood have nursed them upon their knees. In the presence of M. Volney, Marguerite—which was the female servant's name—was careful to address the young lady as *Mademoiselle:* but when they were alone together, she allowed herself the liberty of calling her *Clarine.* And Clarine herself displayed much attachment towards Marguerite, and never issued orders as if conscious of speaking to an inferior. We should observe that immediately after taking the Chateau, M. Volney hired a second female-servant, and also a gardener; so that his domestic establishment consisted of three persons.

A sufficient number of rooms in the central part of the building had been fitted up for the use of the family. At the nearest town M. Volney had purchased such furniture as he required; and though there was nothing elegant nor luxurious in the appointment of the rooms thus rendered habitable, they were nevertheless replete with every comfort. The Volneys received no society and courted none: thus the few genteel families who resided in the neighbourhood, had abstained from calling upon them, inasmuch as they afforded no indications that such visits would be acceptable. We should however make an exception in favour of the village priest—a man well stricken in years, noted for his benevolence of disposition and the purity of his life; and this worthy minister of the Gospel was the only visitor from amidst the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The reader may marvel what the old Chateau in the south of France and the Volney family can have to do with the progress of our tale: we may therefore at once proceed to state that if any interest be felt in the amiable and beautiful Zoe, the wife of Lord Octavian Meredith, she must now be sought within the walls of that Chateau.

Some explanations are requisite to show how this came about. We have already said that the Volney family had inhabited the Chateau—or rather a portion of it, for about five years previous to the time when we now introduce them upon the stage of our narrative. To say that M. Volney was an affectionate father, would be to imply that towards his daughter he unbent in a way of which his frigid demeanour seemed perfectly incapable. Nor did he. He was kind in his manner—and nothing more. Every morning, when entering the breakfast-parlour, Clarine imprinted a kiss on her father's cheek—the same at evening ere retiring to her chamber: but he merely received these filial salutations—he gave them not back in the form of paternal caresses. He never displayed any fondness towards her—much less lavished endearments: but on the other hand his demeanour was always of a uniform kindness—never capricious, and never finding unnecessary fault. Clarine was so accustomed to this demeanour on her father's part that she did not miss a fondness she had never experienced, and she had not to deplore the loss of a more tender love—for she had never known it. Her mother had died in her infancy: her father was always towards her what we now describe him; and never for a single instant had it occurred to Clarine that there was aught deficient of a parent's true tenderness and affection on his part.

Five years had Clarine passed in the comparative solitude of that Chateau without a single lady-acquaintance, and with only the occasional visits of the priest to break in upon the monotony of this mode of life. During all that while it never seemed to have struck her father that he was keeping her out of that society which one of her years might naturally be supposed to crave. But all of a sudden he one day asked her whether she felt her mode of existence lonely? She replied in the negative: and she spoke the truth—she had grown accustomed to it. He nevertheless hinted at his intention to procure her some suitable female companionship; and he even went so far as to express a regret that he had not done so before. This was saying a great deal for M. Volney—and Clarine, so little accustomed to such expressions from her father's lips, regarded the observation as one indicative of the utmost love and kindness.

Several weeks went by after that little conversation, the subject of which appeared to have totally escaped M. Volney's memory. He took his solitary walks as usual—shut himself up in his study as much as heretofore—and left his daughter as completely to her own resources as ever. But during this interval Clarine herself seemed likewise to have ceased to think of her father's transient promise: for instead of her spirits suffering from a prolonged monotony of the life she was leading, they grew gayer and more cheerful than they were before. Thus, when one day, at the expiration of six weeks or a couple of months, her father told her with his accustomed abruptness that she would now at length have female companionship, she looked as if taken by surprise, and even as if the announcement afforded her not the slightest pleasure. But she was accustomed to pay implicit obedience to her sire's wishes; and she therefore offered not a syllable of objection: while he, on his part, did not seem to notice that the communication was received with less satisfaction than it might have been.

The announcement itself was made as the result of some little conversation which had taken place between M. Volney and the village priest. It appeared that a young and beautiful English lady of rank, attended by two female domestics, had arrived at the village, on her way to seek some other part of the Pyrenees as a temporary residence. Being an invalid, she was detained by indisposition for some days in the village; she took a liking to the surrounding scenery; and she resolved to make a halt in that neighbourhood. During a visit to the picturesque little church, she had formed the acquaintance of the priest; and in the course of conversation she had expressed a desire to be received into some genteel but very quiet and secluded French family. The priest was already aware of M. Volney's desire to vary the monotony of his daughter's life; and he mentioned to him Lady Octavian Meredith's wish. The result was that Zoe, attended by her two domestics, took up her abode with M. and Mademoiselle Volney at the old Chateau.

Zoe had been given to understand that M. Volney, having experienced many griefs and cares during his life, was unfitted for society, and was of misanthropic habits: but the worthy priest had told her on the other hand that she would find in Clarine Volney a gay and amiable companion. And such proved to be the case. While M. Volney continued his solitary walks, or remained shut up in his study, Zoe and Clarine were almost constantly together. They soon formed a friendship which ripened into an affection for each other; and Lady Octavian Meredith appeared not to notice the gloom and sombre aspect of the old Chateau, so well was she pleased with the friend whom she had found there.

Lady Octavian was in ill-health; and this appeared in Clarine's estimation to affect her spirits somewhat—but in respect to her beauty, to render it all the more touchingly interesting. Zoe's countenance wore a sainted expression of true Christian resignation to whatsoever might be her fate: and for some time Clarine thought that it was an early death to which Zoe thus resigned herself. But as they grew more intimate, Lady Octavian unbosomed herself completely to her new friend; and then Clarine comprehended that it was not to a sense of physical evils only to which Zoe was thus meekly bowing, but that it was likewise to the sorrow that was consuming her heart.

It will be necessary to afford the reader some idea of the internal arrangements of the Chateau. We have already said that it was a large straggling edifice; but all its parts were connected in some way or another. There was the main building—there were wings, communicated with by means of corridors: beyond these there were other buildings, which were reached by open passages, or rather colonnades. It was a mansion capacious enough for the accommodation of a large family, with forty or fifty servants. The reader may thence judge how the few inmates it now contained, would have been lost as it were if scattered about the edifice: but to prevent this extreme loneliness, all the rooms that were occupied were as much in assemblage as possible. The main body of the building had three storeys in addition to the ground-floor. The dining and breakfast rooms, as well as M. Volney's study, were on the ground-floor—the drawing-room and all the principal bedrooms on the first-floor—the servant's chambers on the second-floor; and the third or highest was totally unoccupied. Passages ran the entire length of the main building, on each of these floors: the principal staircase—the only one used by the present inmates—was in the middle of the building; but at each end there were smaller staircases, at the bottom of which were doors communicating with the corridors that led into the wings. The bedchambers occupied by Clarine Volney and Lady Octavian Meredith, were, as already stated, on the first or drawing-room floor; and their windows looked on the garden at the back of the house. These chambers did not join each other: they were separated by an oratory, or small chapel, the appointments of which had become much dilapidated through neglect. There was an organ in this oratory; and Clarine one day informed Zoe that she had endeavoured to play it, but it was completely out of order. There was however a good piano as well as a harp in the drawing-room: for when M. Volney purchased his furniture, he had not forgotten that Clarine had an exquisite taste for music;—and now, as Zoe was likewise gifted in that respect, the two ladies were enabled to play in concert.

Lady Octavian Meredith had already been several weeks at the Chateau before a syllable reached her ears to the effect that it was reputed to be haunted: and then its evil fame in this respect reached her knowledge from the circumstances that we must record in the ensuing chapter.

CHAPTER C.

THE LEGEND.

ONE evening, in the early part of September, the ladies had been practising music together until about ten o'clock,—when Clarine, complaining of a very severe headache, said that she should at once retire to her own chamber. She bade her friend good night: she next repaired to her father's study, where she imprinted the usual caress upon his cold pale cheek,—receiving from his lips no kiss in return: and she then withdrew.

Zoe had remained in the drawing-room; and feeling no inclination to slumber, she sate down to finish letters that she had commenced to her father and husband in England.

For certain reasons of her own, it was her object to write to Lord Octavian more in the epistolary style of friend writing to friend than of wife to husband. There were no assurances of love in her letter—but plenty of earnestly expressed wishes for his welfare and happiness. She wrote at great length too, as if to convince him that she was gratified in thus corresponding with him, and that the absence of love-assurances arose not from the absence of love itself. She described in most pleasing and graphic language the beautiful scenery amidst which she was dwelling; and only slightly glancing at the state of her health, so worded her allusion thereto as to give him to understand that it experienced no improvement. She was also careful to write in such a way as to make him comprehend that she preferred being separated, for the reason that a sickly wife would only be a clog upon the pursuits of her husband. She told him too that although she herself liked that Pyrenean scenery, it was not such as would compensate any young gentleman of the fashionable world for the loss of the gaiety, bustle, pleasures, and glitter of civilisation to be enjoyed in the British metropolis.

Zoe sate up much later than she had originally intended, in concluding these letters to her father and husband. It was eleven o'clock before she laid down her pen; and then, feeling tired, she reclined back in the chair to rest herself for a few minutes before seeking her chamber. While thus half reposing, the lamp which stood upon the table, and which was an old-fashioned one of heavy bronze, and fed with oil, suddenly grew dim; and in a few moments it became extinguished. Zoe did not choose to ring for another, as she knew that the domestics were accustomed to go to bed early; and she was likewise aware that she would find a light burning in her own chamber: for she had already intimated to Honor, her principal lady's-maid, that she was not to sit up for her, as she had intended to finish her letters before seeking her couch.

Issuing from the now dark drawing-room, Zoe was crossing the passage to reach her own chamber,—when by the clear moonlight which penetrated through the window at the extremity of that passage, she distinctly perceived a human form moving along. At first she thought it must be either M. Volney or the gardener—for it was the form of a man, and they were the only two males within the walls of the Chateau. But the next instant she felt assured it was neither of those persons, it being a much taller figure. It was proceeding rapidly. Zoe stopped short; and the chill of an unknown terror shot through her as the conviction smote her that she heard not the faintest sound of footsteps. A superstitious dread seized upon her: she passed her hand across her eyes—looked again in the same direction—and now beheld nothing to break the silver shafts of the moonlight which streamed brilliantly in through the window.

She hastened into her own chamber, endeavouring to persuade herself that it was a delusion; and also endeavouring to be angry with herself for having yielded to it. But still there was something in her mind which she could not put off—something oppressive—something that lay there like a dead weight, and which rendered her nervous and uneasy. What could it mean? Zoe was strong-minded and little prone to superstitious terror: but now for the first time since she became an inmate of the Chateau, did she feel as if its loneliness and gloom struck cold to her heart. Essaying all she could to conquer the feeling, she hastened to seek her couch: but it was some time before sleep visited her eyes.

When Honor, her principal maid, entered the room in the morning, Zoe was about to tell her what she had seen—or thought she had seen on the previous evening: but suddenly feeling ashamed of herself, she held her peace. The topic however was brought about in another way: for as the maid was combing out the long light beautiful hair of her mistress, she said, "Does your ladyship know that this old mansion has a very strange repute?"

"Indeed?" said Zoe: and it was almost with a start that she had heard her abigail's question.

"Yes, my lady," continued Honor; "and I and Rachel"—thus alluding to Zoe's other female servant—"have been kept awake nearly the whole night, thinking of what we heard for the first time before we went to bed."

"Many very old buildings," said Zoe, "have strange silly legends connected with them; and it is very foolish of you maids to terrify yourselves in this manner."

"I am not frightened now, my lady, that it is broad daylight," answered the maid: "but at night-time, when all is dark and silent, or else when only the moon is shining, it is a very different thing. It was the gardener who was telling us last evening——he speaks a little English, for he was with an English family for two years at Lyons some while ago——"

"And what did this narrator of marvels tell you?" inquired Lady Octavian Meredith, kindly endeavouring by an assumed gaiety of manner to dispel whatsoever remnant of superstitious fear might be lingering in the mind of her maid.

"I will tell your ladyship," responded Honor. "It was never before last evening that he touched upon the subject; because I think he dares not in old dame Marguerite's presence: but she had gone to bed early through indisposition, and so the gardener got talkative."

"And what was it that he said?" again inquired Zoe, affecting a tone of indifference, though she in reality experienced a degree of interest in the expected narrative, for which she felt almost ashamed of herself.

"It seems, my lady," resumed the maid, "that when the first Revolution broke out, the noble family to which the Chateau belonged, fled to England; and for a few years the building remained shut up. At length the Chateau and estate were given by the Republican Government to a gentleman named Lenoir, and who had rendered some signal services by placing in the hands of the authorities certain correspondence that fell in his way, and which proved the existence of a great royalist conspiracy. M. Lenoir was quite young—not above three or four and twenty: he was a staunch Republican; and, as I have said, he was rewarded for his services by having thi

Chateau and the domain then belonging to it, conceded to him. He came to take possession, accompanied by an uncle with whom he had always lived—for he had been left an orphan at an early age. The uncle, your ladyship understands, was therefore young M. Lenoir's heir in case of his dying childless. About a year passed; and one day the inmates of the Chateau were thrown into a state of alarm by the report that the young gentleman had been found dead in his bed. This was found to be only too true; he lay stretched upon the couch with his clothes on; and it was first supposed that he had died in a fit. But for some reason or another which the gardener does not recollect, suspicion of foul play attached itself to the uncle. The corpse of the deceased Lenoir was opened; and it was ascertained that he had been poisoned. The uncle was arrested—tried—and condemned. Before his execution he confessed the crime; and explained that he had mixed the poison in a night-draught which his nephew was in the habit of taking for a feverish thirst which oppressed him. From that period no tenant ever could be found for the Chateau until about five years ago, when M. Volney took it. And now, my lady, for the point of the story. It is said that the spirit of young Lenoir has been seen in different parts of the building; and that sometimes an unearthly sound, like a continuous wailing moan, has been heard. At first there was an old couple left in charge of the Chateau: but they soon resigned their post—for they were nearly frightened to death. Others succeeded them: they saw the same spectacle, and heard the same noise. They therefore left also, until at last no one could be induced to take charge of the premises. Ah! I forgot to say that it is chiefly in this very passage young Lenoir has been seen: for it was in a room a little farther on, just beyond Mademoiselle Volney's, that he was poisoned by his uncle."

Zoe made no comment: she was certainly so far struck by the tale that she wished either she had not heard it, or else that she had not seen, or fancied she had seen that which alarmed her on the previous evening.

"The gardener says, my lady, that all who ever saw the spirit, agree in the description of it. The young gentleman appears as he was when in life—tall and slender—perfectly upright—dressed as he was when discovered on the bed, with all his clothes on, but without boots or slippers; and his countenance is ghastly pale. He does not seem to walk exactly—but to glide slowly along with noiseless feet. Or else he has been seen just about to enter the room where he met his death; and then he turns that ghastly pale countenance of his slowly round upon whomsoever is passing along the passage at the time."

"I hope that neither you nor Rachel," said Zoe, "will give way to these childish superstitions:"—but even as she thus spoke, she shuddered involuntarily: for there was something in the present legend which corresponded singularly if not fearfully enough with the circumstance of the noiselessly gliding form which she had seen, or fancied that she had seen, on the preceding evening.

When at the breakfast-table, Lady Octavian Meredith exerted herself to assume as much gaiety as possibly, and to appear easy in her mind: for she would not willingly have laid herself open to be questioned on a point where her answer would have to be connected with a superstitious terror. M. Volney hurried over his breakfast as usual—and then issued forth to take one of his long, mournful, solitary walks,—leaving the two ladies together. It was a beautiful day; and they presently strolled forth: but Zoe's health was too delicate to suffer her to ramble far; and when they reached the outskirt of a grove, they sate down to rest upon a verdant bank. Despite all her efforts to the contrary, Zoe could not help being at intervals pre-occupied and abstracted: Clarine perceived it; and mistaking the cause, endeavoured to speak soothingly in the sense which she fancied to regard her friend's mournful pensiveness.

"Your thoughts constantly travel back to your native land, my dear Zoe," said Clarine; "and methinks that you repent the sacrifice you are making. But do not give way to melancholy meditations: fortify yourself with all that courage which has hitherto so well sustained you; and if friendship has any soothing power, you know, dearest Zoe, that you possess mine."

"I know it, Clarine," answered Lady Octavian. "And now I feel inclined to unbosom myself more completely than I have ever yet done towards you. Listen—and I will give you my narrative in a continuous and connected form: for hitherto you have only heard it partially and piecemeal."

"Do not speak of it," said Clarine, "if it will distress you."

"On the contrary," replied Lady Octavian, "methinks it will have a soothing effect. You are already aware, Clarine," she continued, "that when I accompanied Lord Octavian to the altar, I deeply, deeply loved him——I deeply love him still! I have told you how I received into the house a young, amiable, and beautiful creature, named Christina Ashton. I believed at that time that I possessed my husband's love as sincerely and as firmly as he possessed mine. Not for a single instant did I imagine it possible that he could look with love upon another; and I am bound to declare my conviction that the soul of Christina is as pure and virtuous as her person is beautiful. I supposed that my husband entertained a generous friendship towards a young lady who had experienced adversity; and the little attentions he paid her, were mistaken by me for the evidences of that kind and disinterested feeling. I was one day destined to be most rudely awakened from this dream into which I had lulled myself——yes, cruelly indeed was I startled into a conviction of the truth! Lord Octavian was driving Christina and myself in an open chaise, when the horses ran away—and the vehicle was upset. I was not stunned—I was not even stupefied: I was merely bruised and hurt to some trifling extent: but from Octavian's lips rang forth the most passionate exclamations of alarm and despair——not in respect to myself, but on behalf of Christina! I was smitten with a fearful consternation: all the sources of life appeared to be suddenly paralyzed and frozen in me;—and yet my mind instantaneously recovered a horrible degree of clearness. Quick as lightning did the resolve take possession of me that I would not betray my knowledge of those words which had rung from Octavian's lips: for I felt that if I did the happiness of all three would be irremediably ruined. I therefore feigned unconsciousness; and the terrible energy which inspired my soul, enabled me to play my part without exciting a suspicion in the breast of either Octavian or Christina. And then I received the most unmistakeable evidences of Christina's affectionate and devoted friendship, as well as of the deep compassionating regard which my husband entertained for me. A dangerous illness followed: for many days I was insensible: there was indeed no dissimulation there! And all that while Christina attended upon me as if she were my sister: she would not quit my chamber; and from the physician's lips did I subsequently receive the assurance that to the amiable and devoted Christina I owed my life. So soon as I approached convalescence, Christina intimated her intention to leave me. Full well did I comprehend the generous and noble-hearted girl's motive in adopting this course. I saw that her heart had not remained insensible to the personal appearance, the elegant manners, and captivating address of my husband Octavian—but that her own innate sense of propriety, as well as her friendship for me, had thus determined her in quitting a home which under other circumstances would have been such a happy one!"

Here Zoe paused for a few moments, and effectually struggled to keep back the tears which had flowed up almost to the brims of her eyes from the very fountains of her heart. She then continued in the following manner:—

"Some weeks passed after Christina left me; and I began to think that we ought not to remain altogether asunder: for I loved her as a sister—and I knew that she loved me with an equal depth of affection. Besides, she had saved my life; and I was incapable of ingratitude. I was also anxious to prevent her from suspecting that I had comprehended the motives which had induced her to leave me: for I had struggled hard at the time to veil what was passing in my own bosom. I resolved to see her; and taking advantage of an opportunity when I fancied that Lord Octavian would be absent on a visit to his father, I wrote to Christina, requesting her to come to me. She did so; and I saw how deeply she was affected on perceiving that my health was far from being restored. Something occurred to take Octavian's father suddenly and unexpectedly out of town: he could not therefore pay the intended visit—and he returned home. He found Christina there. As plainly as you, Clarine, can read the print of a book, could I read all that passed in the minds of Octavian and Christina—and how especially painful the ordeal was for that amiable and excellent girl. Heaven knows, too, it was painful enough for me!—and often and often have I since wondered how I had the presence of mind sufficient to go through it, and how I could maintain the fortitude of a calm composure. I saw that Christina would give worlds for an excuse to depart—but that she dared not devise such a pretext for fear lest it should excite a suspicion in my own mind. On the other hand, with an equal yearning, did I long to afford her that pretext: but on my own side I dared not, for fear lest both herself and Octavian should perceive that I had fathomed the secret of their souls. At length the moment came for Christina to take her departure; and I did not ask her to return. No—I was deeply, deeply annoyed with myself for having invited her thither on that occasion,—an occasion so replete with painful sensations for us all!"

Zoe again paused—but only for a few moments; and then she resumed her affecting narrative in the ensuing terms:—

"Several weeks again passed away, during which I had to sustain an incessant conflict with my own feelings. I could not help studying every look, word, and action on Octavian's part, in order to judge of the depth of his passion for Christina. I saw that he was most cruelly balanced between a sense of his duty towards myself and his love for Christina. I knew that he regarded me with a compassionate friendship, and that he strove hard to invoke the sentiment of gratitude to his aid: for it was through me that he had become enriched. At length I could endure that painful state of things no longer. Some women would have made it a subject of reproach to a husband that he dared to love another: but I was at least spared that injustice and that folly; for my common sense told me that Octavian had no power over his volition, and that he could not control the susceptibilities of his heart. Other women would have abandoned themselves to a frantic outburst of grief, and would have implored their husbands to give them back the love to which they had a right. But again did my good sense intervene to save me from that folly; for I knew—alas, too well!—that where true love never existed, it could not be conceded to even the most tearful and imploring entreaties. Some women, too, might have given way to upbraidings and reproaches: but I was incapable of such foul injustice. I knew it was not Octavian's fault that he had learnt to love Christina:—as well might it have been made a reproach to me that I had loved Octavian! No—none of those resources would I bend to! It was my continuous study to avoid enhancing the painfulness of my husband's feelings, or to suffer him to perceive that I fathomed and comprehended them all. But what was I to do? To lead such an existence was impossible: it was killing myself by inches—it was suffering Octavian to perish also by slow suicidal degrees. We were converting our own hearts into instruments of self-destruction: our feelings were becoming a slow poison for each. And then too I was continuously haunted by the conviction that Octavian was straining every nerve to keep the veil drawn down darkly over his own thoughts, and to lull me into the belief that he loved me. On the other hand I dared not reject his caresses, nor look cold upon his assiduities, for fear lest he should perceive that I knew how forced, how unnatural, and how strained they all were!"

"It was indeed," said Clarine, in a soft sympathising voice, "a fearful existence to lead."

"You cannot wonder therefore, my dear friend," resumed Zoe, "that I at length made up my mind to leave England. The state of my health did, alas! afford too ready a pretext; and the physicians agreed that my only chance of eventual recovery was by removal to a southern clime. On the eve of my intended departure I sent for Christina that I might bid her farewell. She came; and unmistakeable were the proofs of friendship—nay, more, of sisterly love, which the amiable girl gave me. We were alone together in the drawing-room; and on this occasion I apprehended not the speedy return of Lord Octavian. I had some little gift to present to Christina—a testimonial of my affectionate regard; and leaving the room, I ascended to my own chamber to procure it. On returning I heard voices in the drawing-room: they were those of my husband and Christina. I was riveted to the spot: I became a listener. It was a wild impassioned scene that was taking place. Octavian was half mad. He had seen that I had penetrated his secret—he comprehended the reasons which were urging my departure from England: he spoke vehemently and frantically of my self-martyrdom. On the other hand the conduct of Christina was admirable: it was full of deepest pathos and true maiden dignity: there was in it a world of generous feeling on my account, together with the unmistakeable assertion of her own virtuous principles and innate sense of rectitude. She rebuked Octavian when he dared speak of his love for her: she told him what his duty was towards myself. She urged him to accompany me to the Continent. But I will not dwell upon the scene: I cannot—my heart melts within me at the bare recollection. When I knew that it was drawing to a close, I sped up to my own chamber; and heaven alone can tell what preternatural fortitude was conceded to me to enable me to assume an air of calm composure—or at least of tranquil resignation—when Christina glided into my presence. Methinks that the amiable girl herself fancied I must have overheard what had just passed—or at least that I did indeed suspect the love which Octavian bore for her. Her deprecating looks seemed to ask my pardon that she should be, although so innocent, the cause of my unhappiness. But no word escaped the lips of either of us to give unmistakeable expression to what we knew, or thought, or felt, or apprehended. Our farewells were exchanged amidst tears and lamentations at being thus severed; and Christina disappeared from my presence. Then I came abroad."

Here Zoe suddenly ceased; and Clarine, taking her hand, pressed it affectionately. She perceived two tears tracing their pearly path down Zoe's cheeks: the kind-hearted French lady gazed with tenderest sympathy upon her English friend; and the latter, suddenly wiping away those tears, started up, saying, "Come, Clarine—let us return to the Chateau."

They walked on in silence for some minutes,—both engaged in their reflections: for Clarine herself was now deeply pre-occupied. At length awakening from her own reverie, she said, "You have told me your sad tale, dear Zoe, more completely than you had previously revealed it: but still you have not extended your confidence far enough to make me aware how you expect all this to end. Your health is improving—the colour is returning to your cheeks—you may have yet perhaps a long life before you—and you cannot remain for ever afar from your native land, separated from your parent, and dwelling in the seclusion of this old Chateau."

"Alas! my dear friend," responded Zoe, with a look and tone most pathetically sweet and full of an angelic resignation, "this colour which you behold upon my cheeks, deceives you, but does not deceive myself. I feel within me the germs of dissolution—the seeds of decay. Consumption is busy at my vitals: it has already planted its fatal sign upon my cheeks."

"Good heavens, speak not thus!" exclaimed Clarine, the tears gushing from her eyes. "It is distressing to a degree to hear one so young and so beautiful as you thus talk as if death were already looking you in the face!"

"And yet it is so," rejoined Zoe, with a soft, sweet smile. "You perceive, Clarine, that I do not attempt to delude myself. When I was journeying to the south of France, I thought that I should like to find some seclusion, where, with only one friend, I might pass the remainder of my days:—and I have found it. I cling not to life. No—the approach of death will be welcomed by me. In the grave my own sorrows will cease; and the tomb will engulph the only obstacle to the alliance of Octavian with the object of his love. Yes—death will be welcome! You may wonder how—conscious as I am that the elements of dissolution are actively at work within me—I should seem desirous of prolonging my existence by seeking this genial clime of Southern France: you may marvel likewise why—anxious as I am to advance and meet death half way—I did not rather settle myself in some congenial northern atmosphere. But that would be suicidal; and it is a crime for mortals to do aught knowingly to abridge the life which God has given. I no more dare be guilty of such wickedness than I dare leap down a precipice. If my head be giddy and I know that by walking on the edge of an abyss I should fall in, and in its profundities find that death which will be so welcome—it nevertheless is my duty to avoid the brim of the fatal gulf. Now you comprehend, Clarine, wherefore, though welcoming death, I may seem to cling to life—and wherefore, while knowing that the germs of disease are expanding fatally within me, I may appear to be seeking health in this salubrious Pyrenean region."

Zoe spoke with a most touching pathos, and yet without studying thus to invest her language with so deep an interest. Clarine listened with a heart full of emotions: but she made no reply. What could she say? All of a sudden Lady Octavian Meredith appeared to rally her spirits; and she said in even a cheerful tone, "It is some time since we went into the village: let us go thither—it will be a change of scene—and besides, I have some few purchases to make."

To the village the ladies accordingly repaired; and on entering it, the first object that struck them was a new shop which had just been opened for the sale of musical instruments. It was really a very handsome establishment for a small village: but then, as we have already hinted, there were several good houses and genteel families in the neighbourhood. The shop furnished a fine display of pianos; and one especially attracted the notice of Clarine. A card, which labelled it, indicated its price; and likewise by a few descriptive words showed that it was a much finer instrument than the one which she possessed at the old Chateau.

"If my father were rich," said Clarine, "I should ask him to purchase this beautiful instrument for me: for it has really put me quite out of conceit with my own piano."

It was merely in a careless conversational way that Clarine thus spoke,—just as young and inexperienced minds are wont to give expression to any passing whim or phantasy. Zoe at once secretly resolved to purchase the piano for her friend, and to avail herself of the first opportunity to come alone to the village for this purpose. But as they turned away from the shop-window, they perceived M. Volney standing behind them. His countenance was coldly calm and melancholy as usual: he did not appear to have the intention of taking his daughter and Zoe by surprise; nor did he seem to notice the sudden start which was given by both—especially by Clarine—as they thus found themselves face to face with him.

"If you wish for that piano, Clarine," said M. Volney, in his wonted glacial monotony of tone, "you shall have it."

Then, without another word, he entered the shop—looked at the card labelling the piano, to ascertain its price—and bade the tradesman send the instrument at his earliest leisure to the Chateau, where the amount should be promptly paid. The arrangement was concluded in half-a-dozen words: there was no haggling on M. Volney's part—he asked not the tradesman to abate a single franc of the price marked upon the card; and when the matter was settled, M. Volney lifted his hat to Zoe, and passed on his way.

CHAPTER CI.

THE STUDY.

Clarine was perfectly astonished at her father's liberality. The sum he had just agreed to pay on her behalf, was a large one; and, as we have seen, she had previously fancied it to be totally incompatible with his means. She could not rightly comprehend whether he were stretching a point in a pecuniary sense for the purpose of affording her pleasure—or whether he were in reality better off than she had hitherto supposed him. She expressed herself in this uncertain manner to Lady Octavian Meredith, as they slowly retraced their way from the village to the Chateau.

"Your father," said Zoe, "has just done you a great kindness in his own peculiar way. He used as few words as possible; but I have no doubt that in his heart he was rejoiced at being enabled to afford you pleasure."

"My father is always kind to me," answered Clarine, who sincerely believed what she was saying; "and I am convinced that he loves me dearly. I do not remember for years past that he has spoken a harsh word to me."

"Has your mother long been dead?" inquired Lady Octavian Meredith.

"Ever since I was a child," responded Clarine; "and I have no recollection of her. I think that my father must have loved her very, very dearly; because he cannot bear to speak of her. I remember that when I was a girl I used sometimes to ask him about my mother: but he invariably besought me not to mention her name. And then, too, I recollect he would turn aside abruptly, and would press his hand to his brow and seem deeply affected. Of late years I have never alluded to my departed mother: for I have been afraid of giving my father pain. You see that he is afflicted with some secret care—I do not think it is through the loss of property, as some persons have supposed——"

"Your father, then, has been richer than he now is?" said Lady Octavian inquiringly.

"We used to live at a beautiful country-seat in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau," answered Clarine. "It was not large, nor was the annexed estate spacious: but the house was commodious, and very handsomely furnished in a somewhat antique style. We had eight or nine servants—for my father kept his carriage then: but still we saw very little company—my father never was fond of mingling with society—at least not within my recollection. He was always accustomed to be much alone, and to shut himself up for hours together in his own apartment. I remember too that he always had the habit of taking his long solitary walks as he does now. These circumstances make me think that it cannot be the loss of property which is preying upon his mind—because he was the same at our beautiful abode near Fontainebleau as he has been ever since we have dwelt in this Chateau."

"How was it that M. Volney lost his property?" asked Zoe.

"I am not even sure that he lost it at all," replied Clarine; "I only surmise so. It was a little more than five years ago that he one day told me we were going to remove to some other place; and on the very same day a post-chaise bore us off from that beautiful country-seat. Of all the servants old Marguerite alone accompanied us."

"And was the house shut up?" asked Lady Octavian.

"I do not know," responded Clarine. "We left it just as it was, with all the other servants in it: but whether my father, previous to our departure, made any arrangement in respect to the house and the domestics, I am unable to say. He has never spoken on the subject; and old Marguerite is really ignorant upon the point—or else she has always pretended to be. She nursed me in my infancy; and to a certain extent supplied the place of the mother whom I lost. This is why I love and revere her; and this is also the reason why, when my father is not present, she allows herself to address me in terms of endearing familiarity."

"And from that beautiful country-seat you came direct to this Chateau?" said Lady Octavian interrogatively.

"Yes: but I am convinced that when we left that country-seat my father had no fixed idea where he was about to settle his future abode. It was not his intention to remain in the village—nor near it. According to the few words he let fall upon the subject at the time, I have reason to believe that he thought of passing into Spain. It was only after an accidental visit to the Chateau during one of his rambles, that he suddenly took it into his head to settle himself there. You see, my dear Zoe, I have no reason for believing that my father lost any of his property beyond the simple fact of his abandoning such a beautiful residence in order to shut himself up in this old place."

"Perhaps, after all," suggested Lady Octavian, "M. Volney is as rich as ever he was; but inas-

much as seclusion suits the temper of his mind far better than even the limited society which you appear to have had in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau, he has chosen to bury himself in the Cheateau?"

"It may be so," answered Clarine: "but my father never speaks to me of his affairs—and I never ask him any questions. You see he never receives any visitors except the worthy old priest; and I believe that I should not have enjoyed the happiness of your society, my dear Zoe, unless it were that my father had one day bethought himself I might possibly find my mode of existence monotonously dull."

"Yes, indeed," observed Zoe, rather in a musing manner than speaking expressly to be overheard by Clarine; "it does seem hard to debar you from all society!"

"Oh, I require none!" exclaimed Clarine hastily, —"none more than I now possess! I can assure you I do not!" she added with a degree of earnestness which appeared unnecessary for the enforcement of the simple assurance which she thus gave.

They now reached the Chateau; and after a temporary separation to their respective chambers, in order to put off their walking apparel, they met in the drawing-room. About an hour afterwards a cart drew up to the front of the Chateau; Clarine, running to the window, perceived that it contained the newly purchased piano. It was brought up into the drawing-room,—the tradesman himself having accompanied it in order to see that it was properly taken care of by his men. When he had superintended all that was necessary, he presented his bill according to the intimation given him by M. Volney.

M. Volney was in his study; and thither Clarine sped with the bill in her hand. She entered, and presented it to her father. He took it—flung a single glance at the amount specified—and rising from his seat, opened an iron safe. Taking thence a large tin box, he unlocked it; and Clarine perceived that one compartment was full of gold and another of bank-notes. M. Volney took out a roll of those notes to select a couple for a thousand francs (or forty pounds) each; and Clarine, who was watching him with mingled curiosity and surprise, was enabled to observe even at a glance and at the roughest calculation that the tin box contained an enormous sum of money. As M. Volney looked up to give her the notes which he had selected, he perceived the wonder and surprise expressed in her features; and for a moment a cloud passed over his countenance. But the next instant it was gone; and he said, in a voice of unusual kindness, and even with a faint smile upon his lips, "You did not perhaps know that I possessed such ample resources. It may be that I have shown you too little confidence——However," he added, suddenly checking himself, "it is as well this opportunity should have occurred for me to say that all that I have is your's: and if anything should suddenly happen to me, you will know where to find that which will maintain you in comfort—aye, in affluence for the whole of your life."

"Good heavens, my dear father!" exclaimed Clarine, the tears gushing from her eyes: "do not speak on such subjects!—it seems as if I were about to lose you!"

"Remember, Clarine," answered M. Volney, with an increasing mildness of tone, "I am advanced in years; and according to the course of nature—even setting apart those casualties from accident or sickness to which we are all liable ——But do not weep—do not weep! I thought I had just now done something to afford you pleasure. Poor girl! you have not known much of happiness lately—and I would not now throw a damp upon that satisfaction which I hoped to afford you."

"I am glad, dear father," replied Clarine, smiling through her tears, and then quickly brushing them away, "that you now give me an opportunity of expressing my gratitude for your goodness in respect to the piano."

Thus speaking, Clarine took her father's hand and pressed it to her lips. He gazed upon her with a singularly melancholy expression for a few moments: then it seemed as if a sudden access of rage, fierce and bitter, swept over his countenance: but in a moment this in its turn vanished;—and smoothing down the glossy hair of the amazed and half-affrighted Clarine, M. Volney said in a tone full of emotion, "Poor girl, if I thought that I had the right——"

But he suddenly stopped short, and as abruptly turned away—yet not so quickly as to prevent Clarine from catching the look of inexpressible anguish which seized upon his features. The young lady could have shrieked out—there was something so fearful in that look: but she subdued her emotion sufficiently to avoid giving such vent to it. She longed to approach her sire—to ask him what he meant, and what dire woe was afflicting him: but she dared not! And now for the first time Clarine's eyes were open to the fact that she had been all along totally excluded from her father's confidence in every matter in which a daughter might legitimately enjoy it.

"Clarine," said M. Volney, again turning towards her, and speaking with his habitual cold kindness of tone, if the reader can understand the phrase,—"forget what has just passed—forget the unfinished sentence which came from my lips. But you cannot understand it——and you never, *never* shall! As for this dross," he said, glancing with glacial contempt towards the treasure in the large tin box, "do not gossip about having seen it: we live in a secluded place, and it were as well not to suffer whispers to get abroad that may tempt desperate men to a lawless act. And now go, Clarine——forget, I say, what has passed—and be happy, my dear girl—be happy with your new piano. Henceforth in other things, as in this trifling one, will I study your happiness more than I have hitherto done."

M. Volney pressed his lips for a moment to his daughter's forehead—and then gently pushed her from the room. She sped to her own chamber, where she remained for a few minutes to tranquillize her thoughts and compose her feelings, before she returned to the drawing-room—for she did not wish to be questioned by Lady Octavian Meredith: her father had enjoined her to forget what had just passed—and though it were impossible to do this, yet at least she resolved to consider it as sacred. She had suddenly discovered that so far from her sire having lost his property, he was immensely rich; and more than ever, therefore, did she marvel why he should have left his own beautiful mansion and pleasant little estate in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau to bury himself in that gloomy old Chateau on the outskirt of the Pyrenees. Other things likewise entered into the midst of Clarine's thoughts: but with these we have nothing to do—at least for the present.

Having sufficiently composed her countenance, the young lady returned to the drawing-room, where the piano-seller had just finished putting the instrument into proper tune. His account was paid, and he took his departure. Zoe and Clarine now took their turns to try the new purchase; and they were enraptured with it. It was truly a splendid instrument; and they both brought out its fine tones with the grandest effect. They practised together for the greater portion of the rest of that day: but amidst the joy which Clarine experienced in possessing the coveted piano, would come the recollection, saddening and sickening, of that look of indescribable anguish which had swept over her father's features during her singular interview with him in the study. That interview had in a few moments given Clarine's mind the experience of whole years: a veil seemed to have fallen from her eyes; and she was led to reflect upon things on which she had never reflected before. She now saw that there was some deep mystery connected with her parent,—a mystery for which not even the loss of a much-loved wife (as she supposed her mother to have been) could possibly account. Then, what was it? Clarine was bewildered: there seemed no earthly clue to the solution of that mystery;—and moreover it appeared to be her father's resolve that, whatever it were, the secret should die with him.

The ladies separated a little after ten o'clock in the evening, and sought their respective chambers. Zoe was on this occasion attended in her room by Rachel—for the maids took their turns to wait upon their mistress; and Honor had tended her ladyship in the morning. A glance at Rachel's countenance showed Zoe that the girl was labouring under a sense of terror which she vainly endeavoured to conceal. At first Lady Octavian thought of leaving the circumstance unnoticed, in order to avoid a discourse upon superstitious matters: but she perceived that Rachel was trembling to such a degree that she felt it would only be an act of kindness to encourage and re-assure her.

"Rachel," her ladyship accordingly said, "that foolish girl Honor has been infecting you with her terrors. I sincerely hope you will not give way to such childish delusions——"

"Pardon me, my lady, if I seem frightened," interrupted Rachel: "but one cannot always control one's thoughts. I was sitting here all alone, waiting for your ladyship; and all kinds of disagreeable sensations began to creep over me. I looked towards the window, and thought I saw a ghastly pale face gazing in at me: so I went and closed the draperies. Then, as I looked towards the bed, I fancied that I saw that same face looking out from behind the curtains; and it was ever so long before I could muster up the courage to go and peep behind them and satisfy my mind there was no one there. Scarcely had I recovered from this alarm, when the door opened; and such a cold chill swept through me! for I thought I saw some one looking in at me! But again I mustered up my courage: I peeped out into the passage—and there was no one. That nasty door has got such a wretched lock, it opens of its own accord!"

"You have been giving way, my poor girl," said Zoe, "to the hallucinations of your frightened fancy. You must be more courageous. I can dispense with your services this evening: I intend to read a little before retiring to rest; and as you are nervous and uneasy, I will accompany you as far as the door of your own chamber. But you must not tell Honor that I did this—as it is for the first and last time, and henceforth I shall expect both of you to exhibit more courage."

Zoe did not really intend to sit up reading before she sought her couch: but with the kindest consideration she made this a pretext for seeing the terrified Rachel as far as her own chamber. The girl was exceedingly grateful to her mistress; for she was indeed labouring under a nervous trepidation and a sense of superstitious terror which she could not possibly shake off.

"We must tread lightly," said Zoe: "for I would not have it supposed by the other inmates of the Chateau that I possess maids so foolish as to be afraid to go to their own rooms by themselves."

It was with a tone and look of benignant remonstrance that Lady Octavian thus spoke. Taking a taper in her hand, she accompanied Rachel to the storey above, where the young woman and Honor jointly occupied the same chamber. Zoe then retraced her way down the staircase towards her own apartment,—on entering which she recollected that she had left her watch in the drawing-room, on account of having accidentally broken the particular chain she had worn that day. It was not altogether without a certain feeling of apprehension that Lady Octavian crossed the passage and re-entered the drawing-room. The circumstance of the preceding night, and the legend she had heard in the morning, had been vividly recalled to her memory by the spectacle of Rachel's fears. But Zoe did her best to throw off the feeling that was upon her—which was indeed repugnant to her own good sense—and of which she was all the more ashamed after the sort of remonstrating lesson she had a few minutes back been reading to Rachel.

Entering the drawing-room, Lady Octavian Meredith took the watch from the table where she had left it; and she then issued forth again. But scarcely had she crossed the threshold—scarcely had her foot touched the floor of the passage—when she nearly dropped the taper from her hand; and she could with difficulty express an ejaculation of terror on beholding a dimly defined shape gliding onward in the distance. She was suddenly transfixed to the spot with a cold terror: if she could have seen her countenance in the mirror at that instant, she would have been horrified at it, for it was pale as death. Her eyes followed the form with the natural keenness of her vision sharpened to the intensest degree. Whether it were fancy, or whether it were reality, she could not subsequently determine in her own mind: but it certainly seemed to her that the shape was that of a tall slender young man, dressed in dark garments, and that he was gliding onward with footsteps completely noiseless, raising not the faintest echo in that long passage where even the slightest sound was wont to reverberate!

The apparition—or whatever it were—was lost in the obscurity prevailing at the end of the passage. Zoe staggered across to her own chamber; and sinking into a large easy chair, felt as if consciousness were about to abandon her. But by one of those sudden and almost preternatural efforts which the human mind sometimes makes, she summoned up all her courage to her aid—and said to herself, "How foolish—how childish of me! It could have been nothing but fancy!"

And yet she could not persuade herself that it was so: the conviction was strong in her mind that she had seen *something*—but whether a spirit from the dead, or a living intruder, she could not tell. The superstitious fear which was still upon her, prevented her from altogether repudiating the former belief, on account of the gliding noiselessness with which the form had hurried onward. For an instant she was half inclined to seek Clarine's chamber and acquaint her with what had happened: but the next moment she felt ashamed of even allowing such an idea to enter her head. She retired to rest: but it was long before sleep visited her eyes;—and when slumber at length stole upon her, the whole dismal tragedy associated with the Chateau was re-enacted before her mental vision.

When Lady Octavian Meredith awoke in the morning she hastened to draw aside the window-draperies; and the bright September sun poured in so golden a flood of lustre that all her superstitious apprehensions were instantaneously dispelled—and she smiled at what she considered to have been her folly of the preceding evening. How glad she was *now* that she had not sought Mademoiselle Volney's chamber with the history of her idle fears!

"Yes," said Zoe to herself, "it was naught but the imagination! The discourse I held with Rachel—the circumstance of conducting the girl to her own chamber—and the vivid conjuring up of the legend I had heard in the morning,—these were the causes which operated upon my mind, enfeebled perhaps somewhat by care and indisposition. Yes—truly it was naught but fancy on my part!"

It was Rachel's turn to take the morning duty at the toilet of her mistress; and when the abigail entered the chamber, she found Zoe more cheerful than she had been for some time past: for such was the natural effect of a relief from superstitious terrors. Not another syllable was exchanged upon the subject; and Lady Octavian proceeded to the breakfast-parlour,—where she found Clarine, and where M. Volney speedily made his appearance. Zoe could not help thinking that there was a certain dejection in Clarine's looks—a certain despondency which she was endeavouring either to throw off or to conceal. Lady Octavian studied well the countenance and manner of her French friend—but without appearing to do so. She felt persuaded in her own mind that there was really something which hung like a weight upon Mademoiselle Volney's spirits; and now she asked herself whether Clarine could have also seen something to excite her superstitious terrors?

CHAPTER CII.

M. VOLNEY.

The weather was beautiful; and soon after breakfast the two ladies walked forth together. Zoe now perceived that Clarine was more pensive than even while at the breakfast-table—or at least that she struggled less arduously to veil it,—probably because she had been most anxious to conceal her feelings, whatsoever they were, from her father's observation.

"My dear Clarine," said Lady Octavian, at length, "there is something preying upon your mind?"

Clarine gave the sudden start of one who cherished a secret which had just been surprised—or rather the existence of which had just been detected, though the secret itself remained still locked up in her own bosom. She glanced with an air of anxiety towards Zoe—then bent down her looks—and said nothing: but tears gushed from her eyes.

"My dear friend," continued Lady Octavian in the kindest manner, "you yesterday assured me that if for my own sorrows a friendship could afford a balm, I possessed your's. It is now for me to reciprocate the assurance. See! here is the very bank on which we sat down yesterday when I gave you the complete narrative of my own causes of grief. Let it to-day become the scene of that confidence which you will repose in me? I will not so far insult myself, nor insult your own good feeling, Clarine, by saying more than simply to remark that it is from no motive of mere idle curiosity I speak."

"I know it, my dear friend—I know it!" murmured Clarine: and then from her lips escaped a gush of mental anguish which she could not possibly keep back.

Lady Octavian Meredith said whatsoever she could think of to console her friend: but ignorant as she was of the sources of Clarine's woe, it was difficult to shape her words in a form calculated to convey the solace she would fain impart.

"Yes—I will tell you what it is that thus afflicts me," at length said Clarine. "It was a tale I heard yesterday—last evening——"

"After we separated for the night?" inquired Zoe in surprise: "for until that hour, my dear Clarine, methought that you were in good spirits—and all the more so on account of your father's kindness in respect to the piano?"

"Ah! my poor father!" murmured Clarine, in a voice of the profoundest melancholy.

"Good heavens, what is it that you can have learnt?" exclaimed Zoe. "Was it some revelation which old Marguerite may have taken it into her head to make?"—for her ladyship could conceive no other source whence Clarine might have received any such revelation after the hour for retiring to rest.

"Yes—Marguerite—it was Marguerite!" said Clarine, hastily. "But I will tell you, my dear Zoe, what I have learnt! A veil has fallen from my eyes—and I have obtained an insight into the past which has most cruelly afflicted me!"

The young lady paused for a few moments: she was evidently struggling to compose her feelings as much as possible; and at length she addressed Zoe in the following manner:—

"My father in his former years was of a very different disposition from what he now appears to be. He was gay and sprightly—he loved society—though he never was dissipated nor irregular in his conduct. On the contrary, he ever bore the highest reputation for moral worth, honourable behaviour, and lofty feelings. He possessed a very dear friend of about his own age, and of a somewhat higher standing in society. This was the Viscount Delorme,—the bearer of an ancient title as well as the possessor of great wealth. They had been fellow-students together at college—they made the Continental tour together—and though no bonds of kinship united them, yet was it a more than friendship which held them together—it was a true fraternal love. The Viscount Delorme has been described to me as one of the handsomest as well as the most elegant and fascinating of men. He married a young and beautiful lady, who died in giving birth to a son. The Viscount was inconsolable for her loss: he shut himself up in his own chamber—my father was the only person whom he would see. His health suffered; and his physicians earnestly recommended that he should travel, in order that change of scene might have a salutary effect upon his spirits. My father offered to accompany him—and for this purpose to postpone the alliance which he was about to contract with the object of his own love. Such a circumstance may afford you, my dear Zoe, an idea of the strength of that friendship which my father experienced towards the Viscount—a friendship which would even have led him to sacrifice, for the time being, the consummation of his own fondest hopes. But the Viscount would not hear of it; and in order to escape from my father's well-meant importunities that he should accompany him, Delorme took his departure suddenly and stealthily, without leaving a clue to the direction in which his contemplated journey lay. He however left behind him a letter for my father, promising that he would write so soon as his mind should have somewhat recovered from the effects of the terrible bereavement he had sustained. His infant son the Viscount had been consigned to the care of a distant female relative—a Marchioness of considerable wealth, and who resided in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau,—where, I should observe, the Viscount Delorme's country mansion was situated—as you already know that my father's likewise was. Shortly after the Viscount's departure my father espoused the object of his love—my mother."

Here Clarine became deeply affected, as if that allusion to her long departed mother had re-opened the fountains of her grief. But at length conquering her emotions, she continued her narrative in the ensuing manner:—

"The marriage of my father and mother took place about six-and-twenty years ago. At the expiration of a year a daughter was born,—who, if she had lived, would have been my elder sister: but she died a few months after her birth from one of those maladies which are peculiar to infancy. Eighteen months had elapsed without the slightest intelligence being received from the Viscount Delorme, either by my father, or the Marchioness who had the care of his child; and it was feared that he had died in some foreign land. But at length letters arrived to announce that he was still a denizen of this world—that he had travelled through many climes—and that he had resolved not to sadden the minds of his friends with the spectacle of his own deep sorrows until they were mellowed down to the healthier tone of resignation. Such was the mood, according to the letters, to which the Viscount had at length brought himself; and he concluded by announcing his speedy return to his domain near Fontainebleau. These letters were written from Italy: and about three months after their arrival in France, the Viscount himself reappeared at Fontainebleau. I need hardly say that he was cordially welcomed by my father, as well as by the Marchioness—or that he was delighted to observe how his beloved boy had thriven. He settled down once more at his own palatial mansion; and the Marchioness surrendered up the little Alfred to the parental protection. Time passed on: the mind of the Viscount appeared to have completely recovered from its shock; and even the mournfulness which had succeeded upon the phase of bitter affliction was yielding in its turn to happier influences. The friendship between my father and himself continued as warm as ever; and as you may easily suppose, the Viscount was a constant guest at the Volney mansion. After an interval of between three and four years since the birth of the first child, my elder sister—an interval which made my father apprehend that he was now destined to continue childless—I was born. Great was the joy of my parents as I have been informed; and though perhaps my father could have wished for an heir to his name, he was nevertheless filled with enthusiastic happiness when contemplating his infant daughter. And now, my dear Zoe, I am about to touch upon the saddest portion of my tale—that episode in last night's series of revelations which has filled me with so much grief!"

Clarine again paused for a few instants: the tears trickled from her eyes; and Lady Octavian spoke in the most soothing terms which her imagination could suggest. Mademoiselle Volney pressed her friend's hand affectionately—wiped away her tears—and pursued her narrative in the following terms:—

"I was scarcely a year old when a frightful suspicion suddenly seized upon my father. Oh, dearest Zoe! how can I continue?—how can I pursue a theme which sheds dishonour upon my mother's name—that mother whom I have ever thought of with love and reverence, although she perished ere her image could be imprinted upon my mind! It is a painful task which I have undertaken——and yet my soul yearns to make you the confidant of its sorrows! I will compose myself sufficiently to enable me to proceed. Yes—a frightful suspicion struck athwart my father's brain——and it was speedily confirmed! My mother had learnt to love the Viscount Delorme better than her own lawful husband. You understand me, Zoe?"

"Alas too well, dearest Clarine!" responded Lady Octavian, deeply affected. "But was there no possibility of error?—might not your father have mistaken some transient levity for an evidence of guilt?"

"Alas, no!" replied Clarine, in a voice full of the most melancholy pathos: "the evidence was irresistible—my father was dishonoured in his wife——and oh, that wife was my mother! Can you conceive any treachery so dark—any perfidy so black, as that of which the Viscount Delorme was guilty? The explosion was terrific—and the Viscount fled to avoid the vengeance which my half-frenzied sire vowed to wreak upon him. As for my mother——"

"What became of her?" inquired Zoe in a half-hushed voice, as if fearing to put the question: for Clarine had suddenly stopped short—the tears were again trickling down her cheeks—and her bosom was heaving with the sobs that inwardly convulsed it.

"My mother," she said, in a tone that was scarcely audible—"my mother——alas! she received a shock from which she never recovered! Overwhelmed with the sense of her own degradation, and of the wreck which she had wrought with regard to a fond devoted husband's happiness—she died of a broken heart!"

There was another long pause; and then Clarine, after another outburst of grief, continued as follows:—

"The Viscount Delorme had not only proved himself a black traitor to the sacred ties of friendship, but also a coward. He had fled to avoid the duel to which my incensed father purposed to provoke him. Yes—he fled, leaving his child behind him; and thus the little Alfred became once more indebted to the kind care of the Marchioness. My father could not endure to remain at his own mansion—the scene where so much happiness had been so cruelly blighted! He set out for some other clime, taking me with him. Marguerite was my nurse. It was my father's intention to proceed to Italy—I know not whether with any settled purpose—or whether he fixed at random upon that transalpine country, all places in the world being equally the same to him in the desolated condition of his heart. We traversed the Alps by easy stages; for at every halting-place it appears that my poor father went wandering out amidst those dangerous glacier-regions, and that sometimes his rambles were so protracted it was feared that he was lost. Marguerite well remembers that journey: she spoke of it last evening in vivid language. She recollects how we were nearly lost on the heights of Mount St. Bernard—and how the dogs of the Hospice were the instruments of our salvation. She likewise bears in mind how we tarried several days at that Hospice, and in what constant terror she was sustained by the protracted absences of my father amidst those glacier regions so sublime, so terrible! We passed on into Italy: but instead of tarrying there, as it first of all appeared to be my father's intention, he hurried on the journey to Leghorn: there we took ship for Marseilles; and from Marseilles we travelled straight back to the mansion near Fontainebleau. There my father settled down again, after an absence of about four months; and I was too young at the time to receive any lasting impressions of the journey. Never, my dear Zoe, until last night was I aware that these eyes of mine had gazed upon the Alps, or that I had ever passed beyond the frontier of France. I must observe that in consequence of the scandal excited by the Viscount Delorme's infamy in the neigbourhood of Fontainebleau, his respectable relative the Marchioness quitted her mansion, taking the boy Alfred with her; and she proceeded to another estate which she had in the western part of France. Years then passed away."

"Years passed away," said Zoe, mournfully and mechanically repeating Clarine's words; "and you, my sweet friend, were brought up in ignorance of all that had taken place?"

"Yes," responded the young lady,—"in total ignorance! Never was the veil lifted from my eyes until last night. Oh! I am no longer at a loss to comprehend wherefore my father was so impatient, or else so afflicted, whenever in the inncence of girlhood I spoke of my mother. Alas! what pangs must I have excited in his breast!—and heaven knows how unconsciously on my part! My heart weeps bitter tears as I think of it—and likewise because, my dear Zoe, it is shocking——Oh! it is shocking to be unable to look back with respect and with veneration towards the memory of a mother! Yes—and I now comprehend likewise," continued Clarine, her voice sinking so low that it would have been inaudible were it not for the naturally harmonious clearness of its tones,—"I comprehend likewise what dreadful thought must sometimes be uppermost—perhaps *ever* uppermost in the mind of my father! Zoe, dearest friend," added the unhappy Clarine, with a strong convulsing shudder, and fixing haggard looks upon Lady Octavian's countenance, "I now comprehend—my God! I comprehend that he doubts whether I am his own child!"

With these words, Clarine threw herself upon Zoe's bosom and wept bitterly. Her own bosom was torn and rent with convulsing sobs:—for some minutes she appeared as if totally unsusceptible of solace. Zoe lavished sisterly caresses upon her—but she spoke no word: language itself were a mockery if seized upon as a resource to convey consolation under such circumstances. But there is no human anguish so profound that it does not expend itself: and thus was it at length with the grief of the unfortunate Clarine.

"Let me hasten, dear Zoe," she said, "to bring my unhappy narrative to a conclusion. But it is about to take a strange leap—and you will at first marvel how I am in a condition to tell you that which I am about to communicate. Nevertheless, it is the truth—it is no idle dream—no phantasy of the fevered imagination! I am about to speak of the Marchioness and of Delorme's son Alfred. Years passed away after the terrific explosion near Fontainebleau; and Alfred Delorme grew up under the affectionate care of his excellent relative. Meanwhile no tidings had been received from his father. The Marchioness had therefore long deemed the Viscount dead: but it was necessary that Alfred Delorme should reach his twenty-first year before legal proceedings could be taken to establish his claim to the title and estates of his father. It appears that at the very time he attained his majority, some report of a marvellous and singular nature relative to the late Viscount reached the ears of the Marchioness. It was a statement of such a kind that though it seemed scarcely credible, she was resolved to sift it to the very bottom. Though stricken in years—indeed bordering upon sixty—she resolved for Alfred's sake to take this step. I am now speaking of a date between six and seven years back. The Marchioness, in consequence of the intelligence to which I have just referred, resolved to undertake a journey into Switzerland. Alfred Delorme went with her. In due time they reached the Hospice of Mount St. Bernard: for *this* was their destination. There the Marchioness instituted the inquiries for which purpose she had dared a journey so perilous, and so trying for one of her years. The intelligence she had received in France was completely correct: the fate of the Viscount Delorme was cleared up—it ceased to be a mystery!"

"And that fate?" said Zoe, with a half-hushed voice of suspense: for she experienced the liveliest interest in the narrative to which she was listening.

"It appears," continued Clarine, "that when the Viscount Delorme fled from Fontainebleau in order to avoid my father's vengeance, he was attended by only one domestic—a faithful valet who had been for some time in his service. Having before been in Italy, the Viscount determined to return to that country. On arriving at the village of Martigny in the valley which is overlooked by the towering heights of Mount St. Bernard, the valet was taken dangerously ill; and whether it were through an ungrateful recklessness for the man's fidelity—or whether it were for any other reason, I cannot tell you: but certain it is that the Viscount Delorme left him there amidst strangers, bidding him follow on to Naples if he should happen to recover. The valet *did* recover after a long and painful illness; and he proceeded to Naples. But there he could hear no tidings of his master. He returned to France—repaired to Fontainebleau—thence to the estate to which the Marchioness had removed—but still without learning aught of the Viscount Delorme. He therefore engaged himself in the service of another family; and many years then passed away. At length—about seven years ago—this valet was in the serrice of a family who proposed to visit Switzerland, and thence pass into Italy. A part of their plan was to cross Mount St. Bernard. They arrived in safety at the Hospice, where they were received with the welcome which the good monks of that Alpine asylum are accustomed to show to all travellers. There is a museum of curiosities at the Hospice, most of them being the sad memorials of the perished ones whose corpses have been at different times found amidst the snows of the mountains. These curiosities, memorials, and relics were displayed to the family with whom the valet was travelling; and he himself likewise saw them. Amongst them he recognised a peculiar ring, which had belonged to the Viscount Delorme. He questioned the monks on the subject; and it appeared, on reference to the catalogue, that this ring, together with other valuables, were found upon the corpse of a gentleman several years back. The corpse, though completely preserved at the time, nevertheless afforded indications of having been for a considerable period previous to its discovery—perhaps two or three years—embedded in the snow-drift where it was eventually found. There were no papers about the person of the unfortunate individual to show who he was: but he had several articles of jewellery and a considerable sum of money in his possession. It being impossible to establish his identity, the property thus found upon him was rendered available for the funds of the St. Bernard establishment, according to the laws of the Canton. For a long time the corpse was left exposed in the dead-house, in the hope that some passing traveller might chance to recognise it: for the dead are preserved for many years in a life-like state of freshness in that Alpine region. But at length the remains were interred; and as for the jewels, all had been converted into money with the exception of that one ring, which was kept as a means of affording some clue for accident to develope towards the identification of the deceased. It was this report which the valet, on his return to France, conveyed to the ears of the Marchioness; and it was in consequence thereof that she at once undertook that long and perilous journey, in company with Alfred Delorme, to ascertain for their own melancholy satisfaction the truth of the details which had thus reached them."

"How wildly singular is this tale!" said Zoe: "it is full of the marvel of romance. Well has the poet said that truth is stranger than fiction!"

"Yes—wild, and strange, and yet how mournful in every one of its phases," responded Clarine, with a profound sigh. "You may easily suppose, my dear Zoe, that when I heard this narrative last night, I listened to it with an interest so absorbing—with feelings so deeply moved——yes, and with emotions so conflicting, that I cannot describe them!" and Clarine shuddered as she spoke. "Again I say let me hasten and conclude this narrative of mine. The unfortunate Marchioness, on descending from Mount St. Bernard, was seized with illness at Martigny—that very village where years beforehand the valet had been abandoned by his master. There the poor lady died. Alfred Delorme, who had long been unto her as a son, tended her in her last illness—that illness which proved fatal; and he bore her remains to France, where he interred them in the family vault. He then proceeded to Fontainebleau: —and for what purpose, think you? It was to seek an interview with my father, to communicate to him the fate of his sire—that fate which had just been cleared up!—and likewise to implore on behalf of his deceased parent the forgiveness of my outraged father. Alas! I have too much reason to believe that my father was implacable; and that he swore not merely a continued hatred for the memory of the deceased, but likewise a hatred for that deceased's son. Alfred departed in sorrow at the failure of his truly Christian purpose; and it was shortly afterwards that my father quitted his mansion so suddenly, taking only Marguerite and myself with him—and travelling to the South of France, he settled himself in this Chateau, as I explained to you yesterday."

"And Marguerite told you all this last night?" said Zoe. "Then must she have been a complete confidante of your father: for your father alone could have revealed to her all that he learnt and all that took place on the occasion of that interview between himself and Alfred Delorme?"

"Marguerite told me all this last night," responded Clarine: and her countenance was buried in her kerchief as she thus spoke.

"I presume," continued Zoe, "that the young Viscount experienced no trouble in obtaining possession of his deceased father's estates, and of the title thereto pertaining?"

"He experienced no difficulty," answered Clarine.

"Perhaps," resumed Zoe, "your father so suddenly left his own house near Fontainebleau through the apprehension that the ancestral mansion of the Delormes might become the abode of the young Viscount, to whom he had sworn such hatred for his father's sake; and he could not endure the idea of dwelling in the same neighbourhood with one whose very name must ever remind him of his outraged friendship, his wrecked happiness, his dishonoured and perished wife?"

"Yes," responded Clarine: "doubtless that was the reason. But if it were so, it was left to my conjecture—for Marguerite specified it not last night as the motive for my father's conduct in leaving his home."

"And was it with M. Volney's consent," inquired Lady Octavian, "that Marguerite told you all these things last night?"

"Oh, no! no!" murmured Clarine, weeping bitterly, and half stifled with her convulsing sobs. "My father knows not that a syllable of all this has reached my ears! And it was but yesterday, Zoe, when I sought him in his own study for the payment of the piano, that he assured me I should never understand the mysteries which enveloped him. Alas! I am very, very unhappy—— Oh, far more unhappy than you can possibly conceive! How can I hide from my father's knowledge my acquaintance with all these things? The ordeal I just now passed through at the breakfast-table, was terrible! I scarcely dared look my father in the face. Were he not so completely absorbed in the contemplation of his own sorrows—were he not ever looking inwardly, as it were, and seeing naught outwardly—he could not fail to perceive that there is now something fearful hanging over my soul!"

"My dear Clarine," said Zoe, "you must exert all your fortitude to retain your self-possession. It would add infinitely to your father's afflictions if he were to learn that Marguerite has betrayed his confidence—which she evidently has done. Surely, surely there must have been some strong motive for her to tell you all this?"

Clarine said nothing: but again she buried her countenance in her kerchief; and for several minutes appeared to be the prey of emotions which Lady Octavian Meredith considered as too profoundly sacred to be intruded upon by farther questioning.

CHAPTER CIII.

THE SOLEMN INJUNCTION.

The ladies presently retraced their way towards the Chateau. Clarine had now become more calm: indeed she was evidently doing her best to compose her feelings and tranquillize her countenance, in case she should meet her father. Zoe considerately avoided a return to the topic of the previous conversation: for she understood full well wherefore Mademoiselle Volney was thus endeavouring to conquer her feelings—or at least to assume an outward serenity; and her amiable English friend would not willingly disturb her in that attempt. Zoe therefore discoursed upon general subjects, as they slowly wended their way back to the old Chateau: but Clarine only answered in a few words—sometimes in mere monosyllables:—she was deeply pre-occupied.

When the Chateau was reached, the ladies separated to their chambers for the purpose of putting off their walking-apparel; and Zoe had now more leisure to reflect upon all that she had so recently heard. It was indeed, as she herself had expressed it, a tale of wildest romance: and well—too well did it account for M. Volney's sombre moods, for his love of self-isolation, and for those long solitary walks which he was in the habit of taking, as if thereby courting opportunities to be as much alone as possible with his own thoughts. But there was one thing which bewildered Lady Octavian Meredith. She could not possibly conceive for what motive Marguerite had made such painful revelations to Clarine Volney. The old Frenchwoman had the air of a person possessed of generous feelings—her kindness towards Clarine had been the subject of the young lady's grateful eulogy: but Zoe could only regard that lifting of the veil from the mysteries of the past as a most unnecessary piece of cruelty on old Marguerite's side. Wherefore so rudely awaken a daughter from a dream in which she had taught herself to love and respect her mother's memory?—wherefore breathe in her ears the tale of that mother's guilt?—wherefore disenchant her of the vision which had so innocently and in such sweet filial confidence delineated a halo as encircling a mother's name?—and why (oh, cruellest detail of all!)—why plunge a dagger so deeply into Clarine's heart by the hideous intelligence that he whom she had looked upon as her father, entertained a horrible doubt as to his right of paternity?

In this channel flowed the reflections of Lady Octavian Meredith: but her surmises could furnish no possible solution for old Marguerite's conduct. She was loath to come to the conclusion that it was a wanton act of cruelty or inconsiderateness—especially as all Marguerite's antecedents appeared, from what Zoe had that day heard, to be characterized by fidelity and affection towards the family whom she served, as well as by general prudence and discretion. Had the old woman, therefore, some special motive?—was her conduct based upon good grounds?—Zoe was bewildered what to think.

She repaired to the drawing-room,—where she found Clarine seated in a pensive mood at the window; and thinking to enliven her, Lady Octavian proposed to play upon the new piano. Then Clarine burst into tears.

"He who so kindly gave me that piano yesterday," said the afflicted young lady, "doubts whether I am really his daughter! And yet how generous of him thus to minister unto my whims and caprices! A thought occurred to me yesterday—and it was for the first time in my life—that the conduct of my father——for by *that* name must I ever call him——had been deficient in the tenderness of affection which a parent shows towards a child. But now, after all I learnt last night, I ought to wonder that he has ever shown me any love or kindness at all! Oh, my dear Zoe, with these dreadful ideas that are now floating in my brain, I feel as if I myself were utterly, utterly unworthy of all regard—all kindness on my father's part!"

"Speak not thus, dear Clarine," said Lady Octavian: "you are not responsible for your mother's frailty. You must conquer your feelings—indeed, indeed you must! You do not wish your father to perceive that there is anything strange or unusual with you; and yet you are adopting the very course which may betray to him that your knowledge of to-day is far different from your knowledge of yesterday!"

The amiable Zoe continued to reason in this manner, and to give her friend Clarine the best possible advice. She even induced her to sit down and practise at the new piano: but the unhappy Mademoiselle Volney, though doing her best to assume a tranquil exterior, nevertheless seemed as if she had received a blow from which she would never recover.

During the dinner-time Zoe was in a continuous apprehension lest M. Volney should notice the frequent moods of pre-occupation and abstraction into which Clarine fell: but fortunately he did not—or if so, he appeared not to be conscious of the circumstance. He retired as usual to his study soon after dinner: the two ladies passed the evening together; and though Lady Octavian exerted herself to her utmost to cheer Clarine's spirits, the attempt was evidently ineffectual: for when Clarine forced herself to smile, it was in so sickly a manner that the unhappy young lady's countenance appeared to reflect all the anguish of a breaking heart.

As the evening deepened, and the usual hour of separation was drawing nigh, Zoe's amiable and considerate disposition suggested an idea, which, she flattered herself, would be fraught with solace to her suffering friend.

"My dear Clarine," she said, "you are in such a frame of mind that I do not like to leave you by yourself for so many long, long hours. There is always consolation in the companionship of friendship: suffer me to pass the night with you?"

Sudden was the start, and for an instant singular and unaccountable was the look, with which Clarine received that kindly meant proposition: then, the next moment winding her arms about Zoe's neck, she murmured, "No, my dear friend! Think me not ungrateful—think not that I fail to appreciate your generous kindness: but it will be better for me to be alone with my own thoughts—to commune with myself—and to study well the pathway which I have henceforth to pursue!"

"I beseech you, Clarine," persisted Zoe, "to grant me my request. The night is gloomy—the weather has changed since the morning—the wind is moaning round and through the old Chateau; and when the mind is attenuated by sorrowful thoughts——"

"Oh, I have no superstitious terrors!" ejaculated Clarine quickly. "A thousand thanks, my dear friend, for your kindness—a thousand thanks! —but I will pass the night alone——And perhaps to-morrow—to-morrow," she repeated, with a singularly anguished and abstracted look, "I shall be more resigned—I shall be all the better prepared to meet my sad, sad destiny!"

For an instant it struck Zoe that there was something peculiar—something unnatural or at all events incomprehensibly mysterious in Clarine's look and manner, as well as in her tone: but when Mademoiselle Volney had embraced her and hurried forth from the apartment, Lady Octavian thought within herself, "It is the bitterness of her affliction which renders her thus strange. Alas! grief does indeed at times produce eccentric aberrations of the reason; and, poor Clarine! she has not the same fortitude as myself in yielding to that which she so piteously described as a sad, sad destiny!"

On quitting Zoe, Clarine proceeded as usual to M. Volney's study, to imprint the wonted kiss upon his brow and receive that nightly benediction which he never failed to give. Oh! how tumultuously did poor Clarine's heart beat as she approached that study-door!—with what a sense of anguish did she stop to press her hands against her heaving bosom, as if she could thereby silence the palpitations of that heart of her's!—and how painfully for a few instants did she find herself compelled to lean against the wall for support. But it sometimes happens that at the very crisis of the most torturing ordeal a preternatural fortitude suddenly seizes upon those who are to go through it,—nerving them with the requisite amount of courage. And thus was it now with Clarine. She regained a degree of outward composure which astonished herself; and the next instant she stood in her father's presence.

"Sit down, Clarine," said M. Volney. "I would speak to you a few words."

Fortunate for her was it that his countenance was half averted, and that he completely shaded his eyes with his hand as he thus spoke: for if he had only happened to glance towards her at the instant, he would have seen that all her composure suddenly vanished, and that she sank upon the seat as if overcome by a mortal terror.

"Clarine," continued M. Volney, "I have long wished to speak to you on a particular subject; and the few words which passed between us yesterday, more than ever impressed me with the necessity of so doing. You see that I am awakening to a sense of your lonely position, shut out as you are from that society in which at your age it is natural you should desire to mix—and indeed in which you *ought* to mix. Yes, my poor child! I will henceforth endeavour to consider you more and myself less than I have hitherto done. You will not always have Lady Octavian Meredith with you: I dare say that she will soon become wearied of this monotonous mode of life——"

"On the contrary, my dear father," Clarine ventured softly to observe: "Lady Octavian loves this seclusion where she has found a home. As for myself——"

"I know that you are a good and obedient girl," interrupted M. Volney somewhat hastily: "and it is that which——"

But he suddenly stopped short,—his countenance still averted, his eyes still shaded by his hand. A deep but inaudible sigh slowly convulsed Clarine's bosom: for she comprehended only too well how her father would have finished his sentence if he had not caught back the words which had involuntarily risen to his lips. He would have said, "It is this that makes me show you whatsoever love and kindness you have ever known on my part!"

"Yes—you are a good and dutiful girl," continued M. Volney after a pause: and still he seemed as if he dared not turn his eyes towards Clarine. "And now listen to me attentively: listen also with that complying and obedient spirit which you have ever manifested towards me. I said yesterday that we are all mortal—that I am advanced in years, and that in the ordinary course of nature my time must soon come. And then too there are accidents and casualties—and it may likewise be, Clarine," he continued, speaking in disjointed sentences, as if he were really much moved inwardly, though his voice was cold,—"and then too, Clarine, it may enter into my plans to send you where you may mingle in that society where you ought to move——"

"But my dear father——"

"Do not interrupt me," he said, waving his hand somewhat impatiently, and then replacing that same hand before his eyes to shade them again: "but listen in silence. The injunction I am about to give you is one vitally necessary——and yet I cannot explain the reasons—nor must you ever seek to know them. It is true that accident may some day waft them to your ear; and if so ——But no matter! Listen to my injunction! You cannot always remain a prisoner in this old Chateau, Clarine: sooner or later you will go into the great world—and there you will mingle amidst the busy throng. Let me hope, too, that your hand will be sought in marriage by some eligible suitor: for I have already told you, Clarine, that you will be rich at my death. Weep not—weep not, my poor girl!"

Thus speaking, M. Volney rose suddenly from his chair; and pressing his lips to Clarine's forehead, he smoothed down her hair for a few moments with his hand. He then resumed his seat,—shading his countenance as before.

"Let me hasten," he said, "to conclude this scene, and to specify the injunction towards which I am so long in coming. It is this, Clarine:—that there is one person in the world whom you must never suffer to approach you—one person with whom no friendly words must ever be exchanged by your lips: and if you felt that your heart could possibly love this one to whom I allude, pluck that heart out of you—kill yourself sooner——"

A cry thrilled from Clarine's lips: M. Volney started up from his seat; and the afflicted young lady exclaimed, "O father! father!"

"Pardon me Clarine! I have been too abrupt—too vehement likewise! I have made use of language which is indeed but too well calculated to startle and horrify you, incomprehensible as it must be!"

Again M. Volney passed his hand caressingly over her hair; and in a tremulous voice he said, "Courage, Clarine—courage for only a few moments! Bear with me—have patience! This is a scene which is necessary *now*—but which need never be renewed!"

Again did he return to his seat: and again did he shade his countenance with his hand.

"It is possible, Clarine," he continued, "that sooner or later in the great world you may meet an individual bearing the name of the Viscount Delorme."

Clarine gasped with anguish: but no audible sound came from her lips—yet her face was of a death-like pallor.

"It is this man," continued M. Volney, perfectly unconscious that Clarine had exhibited any fresh paroxysm of emotion,—"it is this man whom you must avoid as if he were a mortal enemy. If I be living when you should thus happen to meet him,—supposing you ever *do* meet—recollect that it would fill my cup with misery to overflowing if you were to disobey me: and if I be dead, say to yourself that even from the tomb itself the spirit-voice of him who has cherished you proclaims the existence of an eternal gulf between yourself and that same Viscount Delorme!"

Having thus spoken, M. Volney remained for more than a minute with his looks averted and his hand still shading his countenance. This gave Clarine leisure to compose her own agonized feelings somewhat; and it was once more with a preternatural fortitude, astonishing even herself, that she became armed.

"And now good night, Clarine—good night, my dear girl!" said M. Volney, at length rising from his seat, and once more imprinting a kiss upon the young lady's forehead.

"Good night, dearest father," she murmured: and the next moment the door closed behind her.

She sped up to her own chamber—she threw herself upon her knees—she buried her countenance in the bedding: she wept and sobbed convulsively. She called upon God to strengthen her: she gave vent to low but passionately uttered words of agony. It was sad—it was sad indeed, to think that one of her age, in the bloom of incipient womanhood, when the world ought to be stretching like a lovely garden full of flowers before her vision,—Oh! it was sad that she should experience such utter desolation of the heart. And yet it was so. Alas, poor Clarine!

But we must now return to Lady Octavian Meredith. Little suspecting what was passing between Clarine and her father, Zoe had retired to her own chamber. She felt not the slightest inclination to retire to rest; and she dismissed her maid for the night without beginning to disapparel herself. She sate down to reflect on all she had heard that day: she was mournful on her friend Clarine's account; and the thought of the sorrows of another sharpened instead of mitigated the recollection of her own. The wind was moaning dismally without; and these sounds were by no means calculated to cheer Lady Octavian's spirits. She remembered the circumstances which for two consecutive nights had alarmed her when crossing the passage; and she could not possibly repress the cold shudder of a superstitious awe.

Nearly half-an-hour had elapsed since Zoe sought her chamber—and she was still seated at her toilet-table without commencing the slightest preparation for retiring to rest. She was falling into a deeper and deeper reverie,—in which all that concerned herself, all that concerned Clarine, as well as the legend attached to the Chateau, were blended—yet in no confused and incomprehensible jumble. Presently the idea gradually began to steal into Lady Octavian's mind that strange sounds were being wafted to her ear,—sounds that were distinct from the dull dismal moaning of the wind—sounds which no current of air in its gush through the passage could possibly create. A feeling of terror crept over Lady Octavian: she listened with suspended breath. The sounds were like the continuous moaning of a human voice,—now swelling into a louder strain of agony—then sinking into the lowest and most plaintive wail. What could it be? She thought of Clarine. But no—impossible! The two chambers were separated by the old chapel, or oratory; and no notes of sorrow sounding in Clarine's room, could be heard by Zoe in her own. Then, what was it? She was now so excited by alarm that her feelings grew almost desperate: she could not endure this horrible state of suspense.

Starting up from her seat, Zoe seized the taper and was about to open the door in the hasty violence of her excited feelings, when she suddenly recollected that it would not be well to alarm others who were in the house. She was naturally courageous, and therefore considerate. She opened the door with the utmost gentleness—and looked forth into the passage. It was natural that her glances should be tremblingly and shudderingly cast in that direction where she had twice seen—or at least fancied she had seen the figure that had so much alarmed her: but now she beheld nothing. She advanced, treading noiselessly, and stopping at every instant to listen. She could now distinguish more distinctly than at first those sounds which had brought her forth from her chamber. Moaning and plaintive were they—now continuous and prolonged—then dying away—then gradually rising again, or else suddenly springing up from silence. The idea that it was a human voice grew fainter and fainter in the mind of Lady Octavian Meredith: but still she was utterly at a loss to comprehend what the source or cause of these sounds might be.

She had halted just in front of the folding-doors belonging to the oratorio, or small chapel, intervening betwixt her own chamber and Clarine's; and she was convinced that the strange unaccountable sounds came from within that chapel. She mechanically placed her hand upon the old-fashioned rusted latch of those doors: it yielded to her touch—and one of the leaves of the tall portals opened slightly. The gust of wind which issued forth, nearly extinguished Zoe's taper: but fortunately she just shaded the light in time to save it. She pushed the door further open: the sounds had now altogether ceased: but expecting that they would revive again, she was impelled by curiosity to enter the chapel. She found herself first of all in a little vestibule, in front of which hung a heavy curtain, whose material had once been a rich velvet: but the entire drapery was now so faded, so torn, and so tattered, that it was a mere worthless rag. It seemed as if the hand of a child might tear it down, so flimsy was it. It waved slowly to and fro with the wind which swept through the chapel; and now once more did those strange sounds reach the ear of Lady Octavian Meredith. It was evident that the wind wafted them: but still she was at a loss to conceive their source.

It was with a feeling bordering upon superstitious awe, that Zoe stretched forth her hand to put aside the curtain in order to enter the oratory. A scream was well nigh bursting from her lips when she beheld what appeared to be a couple of tall dark figures standing just within: but a second glance showed her that they were two suits of armour standing upright—one sustaining a lance in a perpendicular position—and both having a life-like appearance. These panoplies were in every respect perfect. The vizors of the helmets were closed,—so that it was easy to fancy the human wearers were within those rusted steel suits. The helmets, too, were surmounted with plumes; and there was something ominous and

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awe-inspiring in the motionless attitude of those panoplies. Indeed, for an instant Zoe could scarcely divest herself of the idea that they would either advance towards her, or that a voice would emanate from behind the barred aventayles of the helmets.

Speedily recovering her self-possession, Lady Octavian Meredith approached the suits of armour, and inspected them. She endeavoured to lift one of the closed visors: but it resisted the force of her delicate hand,—doubtless because the nails forming the rivets on which it moved, were completely rusted in their settings. Turning away from these panoplies, Zoe advanced farther into the chapel. It bore all the evidences of neglect: the walls were covered with damp—the tall, slender, sculptured shafts which sustained the pointed roof, were green with mildew. Some of the windows were totally deficient in glass; and the wind swept through them. At the farther extremity was an organ, placed in a gallery: but the yellow reed-like arrangement of the frontage was so dingy with collected dust, and perhaps with damp likewise, that the original vividness of its colouring could no longer be discerned. A dilapidated staircase led up towards the gallery: but the balustrade of bronze, elaborately worked with beautiful devices, remained perfect, though utterly dimmed and disfigured by the encrusted rust. There were several large pictures suspended to the walls: the frames were ruined—the canvass was torn, or else had given way with the effects of time and neglect; and the subjects of the paintings were unrecognisable.

While gazing about her, and holding up the light in the manner that would best aid her in this survey, Zoe perceived that a portion of the floor of the gallery had given way; and she could thus look up into a part of the interior of the organ. While thus gazing in that direction, Zoe heard the wind come rushing in through the broken windows with renewed force; and as it swept gustily into the chapel, those strange sounds were more audibly renewed than before. An idea struck Zoe: a light flashed in unto her mind:—she comprehended those sounds in an instant. They were caused by the wind rushing up through the dilapidated floor of the gallery, and passing through the pipes of the organ. According to the gusty variations of the wind, so were the sounds produced,—solemnly swelling or plaintively wailing; and thus the mystery was explained.

Zoe could now afford to smile at the apprehension which had brought her forth from her chamber; and she said to herself, "Doubtless my fancy in respect to the figure which I have twice seen in the gallery, would be explained with equal ease if accident or research were only to place me on the right track. The causes of these superstitious fears prove to be nothing more than mere natural ones when their mystery is fathomed—in the same way that a ghost, with its white extended arms, seen by the roadside of a dark night, turns out when approached to be merely a sign-post."

Lady Octavian Meredith began to retrace her way through the chapel; and once more did she find herself in the vicinage of the two suits of armour. She now passed them without the slightest dread; and she was about to draw back the curtain, when she was startled by a sound as of a door opening close by. She looked back; and she beheld a figure muffled in a cloak, and wearing what seemed to be a low slouching hat. Again did a scream well nigh part from Zoe's lips; and it was a marvel that the light did not fall from her hand: but a second glance revealed to her the countenance of M. Volney. He was standing in evident astonishment at beholding the Lady Octavian there; and she, feeling that her position was an awkward one, resolved to be candid at once.

"Monsieur Volney," she accordingly said, "you are naturally amazed to behold me in this chapel: but I beseech you to suffer me to explain."

"I am certain," responded the French gentleman, with that courtesy which he was always accustomed to exhibit towards Zoe, "that your ladyship can have none but a justifiable motive for being absent from your chamber at this hour."

Zoe at once proceeded to explain how her ear had caught a succession of sounds which had at first alarmed her—and how, being worked up to an intolerable degree of excitement, she had issued from her room in the hope of ascertaining the source of that which had filled her with apprehension. She went on to observe that she was unwilling to disturb any one—and that, in all probability, if she had failed to discover the cause of those sounds, she should have kept the secret to herself.

"Because," she added, "nothing makes a person appear more ridiculous than the confession of having given way to superstitious terror."

She then proceeded to explain how she had discovered that the pipes of the organ were the sources of the sounds which had alarmed her.

"I agree with your ladyship," said M. Volney, who had listened with deep attention to Zoe's narrative, "that it is always better in such cases to proceed to an investigation at once. But tell me frankly, Lady Octavian Meredith," he continued, fixing his regards scrutinisingly upon her, —"is this the only source of alarm which you have experienced since you have been in the Chateau?"

Zoe blushed—and for an instant looked confused: but the next moment recovering her self-possession, she said, "I will answer you frankly, M. Volney; and if I had intended to suppress certain circumstances which I am now about to reveal, it was only because I dreaded to appear ridiculous in your eyes."

"Speak, Lady Octavian," said the French gentleman, still regarding her with a visible interest, and with a strong, even painful curiosity.

Zoe proceeded to explain how she had twice seen a figure gliding rapidly and noiselessly along at the extremity of the passage, and at about the same hour on the two consecutive evenings.

"Is your ladyship sure," inquired M. Volney, "that these were not the phantoms of mere imagination, influenced by the knowledge of the legend attached to the Chateau?"

"It is possible that the second occurrence might thus have been the result of fancy," answered Zoe; "although in my own mind I can scarcely arrive at such a conviction. But that in the first instance it was quite otherwise, I can positively affirm, inasmuch as it was not until the following morning I became acquainted with the legend, when one of my maids was accidentally led to narrate it."

"I positively charged my daughter as well as the servants," said M. Volney, "not to make that legend the subject of their idle gossip in respect to either your ladyship or your own domestics: for though I had too high an opinion of *your* intellect, Lady Octavian, to imagine for a moment that such a tale would at all disturb your equanimity—yet I was less certain in respect to your maids. For the minds of those who are only partially educated, are more susceptible of the influence of superstitious terrors——"

"I will candidly inform you, M. Volney," said Zoe, "that it was the gardener who acquainted my maids with that legend: but I beseech you not to visit him with your displeasure."

"And you saw that form while as yet ignorant of the legend?" said M. Volney in a musing tone, and with a strange darkness of the looks. "Then I myself could not possibly have been deceived!"

"What mean you?" inquired Zoe quickly, as well as anxiously.

"What appearance had the figure?" asked M. Volney, without heeding Lady Octavian's question.

"I saw it but dimly," rejoined her ladyship; "and whatever it might have been——I mean if it were some real living intruder——I could not conscientiously declare upon my oath in a Court of Justice that the description, as it was faintly impressed upon my mind, is the accurate one. But it certainly seemed to me to be the form of a tall man, of slender figure—young too, I should think—and apparelled in dark garments. My ear caught not the slightest sound of a footfall on either occasion; and thus, when after the first occurrence I heard that legend which represents how the unfortunate Lenoir is supposed to glide with his shoeless feet through the passages of this Chateau, I was certainly struck with a strange feeling."

"Yes—strange, most strange!" muttered M. Volney: and then he looked deeply perplexed.

"And you yourself," said Zoe, again in anxious inquiry, "have some reason——"

"Your ladyship has been candid with me," interrupted the French gentleman: "I will be equally candid with you. Listen, Lady Octavian! Never until this night was I in the faintest degree affected by that legend. Indeed, I have very rarely thought of it since the first day—some five years back—that it was communicated to me. But to-night it is different! I was ascending from my study to my own chamber, when methought that at the end of a passage I beheld a form—just as you have described it—and in exact correspondence with the superstitious details of the legend. Not however that I perceived the countenance of that form: it was merely the figure itself; and it was gliding along noiselessly as if with shoeless feet—as you yourself have just explained it. I was staggered: methought it was an hallucination: I passed my hand across my eyes; and when I looked again, the figure was gone. I proceeded to my chamber, endeavouring to persuade myself that it was mere fancy on my part: but the idea haunted me. I repaired to the gardener's room, to assure myself that it could not have been that man thus roaming stealthily about: I entered—he was sleeping soundly—I retired without awakening him. Then it occurred to me that some evil-intentioned individual might have got into the Chateau. The night being windy and unusually bleak for the season of the year, I enveloped myself in my cloak—secured a brace of pistols about my person—and prepared to issue forth to make the round of the premises. As you are perhaps aware, there is a staircase at each extremity of the gallery; and doors are at the bottom of those staircases. I descended the stairs of that extremity where I had seen the form: the door at the bottom was locked, as usual, but a general pass-key which I have about me at once opened it. I went forth: I made the circuit of the building: I could distinguish no signs of any burglarious entry. I returned by a private staircase opening into this chapel, and the door of which is just behind that farther suit of armour. You may conceive my astonishment on beholding your ladyship here."

Zoe had listened with the deepest attention to his narrative,—a narrative which appeared most materially to confirm her own belief that what she had seen was very far from being a delusion. There was a silence of some minutes, during which both herself and M. Volney were buried in profound thought: but it was at length broken by that gentleman,—who said, "It is impossible, Lady Octavian, we can blind ourselves to the fact that we have indeed seen something. But it were useless to inspire others beneath this roof with any apprehensions. Such I have already ascertained to be your ladyship's own considerate idea; and therefore I need not suggest that we keep silent on these points."

Zoe readily gave M. Volney an assurance to a similar effect; and they separated. But when Lady Octavian once more found herself alone in her own chamber, she experienced a renewal of a superstitious terror, which despite all her efforts she could not cast off. At length, ashamed of herself, she retired to rest: but when sleep stole upon her eyes, her dreams were haunted by the stealthily gliding form of the murdered Lenoir—by hideous shapes, uncouth and terrible—by suits of armour marching majestically before her mental vision, their plumes waving ominously above their helmets. And then, too, it appeared to her that the organ in the chapel was pouring forth its full tide of lugubrious and mournful harmony—swelling at length into a terrific volume of sound, which rolled its awful diapason through the entire building. When Zoe awoke, the light of the refulgent sun was streaming in at the windows: the wind had completely gone down: the heavens were clear and beautiful; and the climate of that Pyrenean region was as serene, as warm, and as genial as Zoe had at first known it.

CHAPTER CIV.

THE PRECIPICE.

WHEN Lady Octavian Meredith met M. Volney and Clarine at the breakfast-table, she perceived that the countenance of the former was more pale, more haggard, and more care-worn than she had as yet seen it, and that Clarine's cheeks had likewise lost their colour. She herself was pallid and much indisposed, through having passed so troubled a night: there was little conversation—and no one asked the cause why the others were dull. Doubtless M. Volney fancied that the conversation which he had with his daughter in his study on the preceding evening, had affected her spirits: but Zoe attributed her friend's mournfulness to her knowledge of all those mysteries which so intimately regarded her sire.

Immediately after breakfast, M. Volney quitted the room; and the ladies were left to themselves. Zoe at once proposed that they should go forth to walk: for she fancied that the fresh air and the cheerful aspect of nature would have a healthful influence over herself, and would tend to improve the spirits of her friend Clarine. Mademoiselle Volney at once assented: and they went forth together.

"Wherefore, my dear friend," asked Lady Octavian, "do you not endeavour to surmount this melancholy which has taken possession of you? Believe me, dear Clarine, your father cannot fail shortly to perceive——"

"Zoe," interrupted Mademoiselle Volney suddenly, and speaking as if with a strange wild gust of feeling, "you know——Oh, you know not how wretchedly unhappy I am!"

"I know it, my sweet friend," responded Lady Octavian in a deeply compassionating tone; "and I need not assure you that you possess my warmest sympathy. But for your own sake, and that of your father——"

"O Zoe!" interrupted Clarine with passionate vehemence, "you do not understand me! If you only knew all!"

"Heavens! my dear friend," said Lady Octavian; "is there anything that you have concealed from me? Yes—yes—I perceive it!—there is something more than what I already know, and that is making you thus miserable! Clarine," continued Lady Octavian very seriously, "if there be aught in which you require the counsel of a friend, I beseech you to make me your confidante!"

"Yes—I will—I ought!" said Clarine, now sobbing violently, and for a few moments wringing her hands as if with frantic grief. "You know not half my wretchedness! All that you *do* know is surely enough to account for a world of misery; but my heart holds enough to fill the entire universe!"

"Good heavens! what words are these to come from your lips, Clarine?" said Zoe. "You frighten—you terrify me! I beseech you to relieve me from this cruel suspense: for believe me—Oh! believe me, Clarine, the friendship I entertain for you is as great as if we had known each other for years instead of weeks!"

Mademoiselle Volney had all of a sudden grown calm: she bent a look of ineffable gratitude upon Lady Octavian Meredith: then she took her hand, and pressed it to her bosom. They walked on for some minutes in silence,—Clarine buried in profound reflection—Lady Octavian burning to become acquainted with her beloved friend's source of anguish, yet not daring to put another question on the subject. They had walked in a direction which, when together, they had never happened to take before: it was on one of those slopes which gradually ascend into the mountainous outskirts of the Pyrenees; and all of a sudden they came upon the brink of a deep yawning chasm.

"It was here!" shrieked forth Clarine, as abruptly catching her friend Zoe by the arm, she held her back.

Lady Octavian Meredith was far more startled with Clarine's tone and manner, than even by the fact of finding herself on the verge of that abyss: because there was a low paling fencing it—and therefore nothing too dangerous to prevent the instantaneous recovery of her presence of mind.

"What do you mean, my dear friend?" she asked: "what do you mean by saying that it was *here?*"

Clarine spoke not a word—but led the way towards a little knot of trees higher up the slope, and at about a distance of two hundred yards from the ravine on the escarped side of which they had so suddenly halted. Beneath the shade of those trees the ladies sate down; and Clarine, looking towards the chasm, heaved a profound sigh and murmured, "It was there!"

Zoe said nothing, but looked anxiously in Mademoiselle Volney's face, at the same time pressing her hand to assure her in advance of whatsoever sympathy might properly be yielded to the tale of affliction she was about to tell. For that it *was* a tale of woe. which was presently to issue from Mademoiselle Volney's lips, Zoe could not possibly doubt.

"Listen to me, my dear friend," said Clarine; "and I will tell you everything—yes, I will tell you everything! I will relieve this surcharged heart of mine. Although my life was so lonely here, yet was it happy enough for several years—because mine was *then* a disposition which could readily adapt itself to all circumstances; and moreover it was sufficient for me that my father thought fit to settle our abiding-place in this neighbourhood. My music, my books, and my embroidery or other needlewook, served to wile away much of my time. It was very rarely indeed that my father invited me to walk out with him; and when I took exercise by myself, I was frequently in the habit of bringing with me a book, which I would either read while walking along, or else I would seat myself in some shade like this to study its pages at my leisure. One day—a few months ago—my father said to me that he feared I must experience the monotonous loneliness of the life I was leading; and he volunteered a promise to procure me some eligible female companionship. I was rejoiced at his kindness—but assured him that I was perfectly content to live in the way that best suited his own tastes and habits. He nevertheless reiterated his intention to adopt the means of affording me some little change or recreation. After this interview I reflected much on what my father had said; and I was pleased at the idea. I remember that the very day following——Oh! how could I ever forget that day? Is not its date indelibly graven on my memory?"

Here Mademoiselle Volney paused for a few minutes,—during which she reflected profoundly; and then she continued in the following strain:—

"It was on the day after that conversation, as I have just said, that I came forth to take my usual exercise. I brought a book with me; and I roamed in this direction. The book that I brought was one I had purchased on the previous day in the village. It was Lamartine's *Jocelyn*—a beautiful poem, characterised by the most touching pathos as well as interspersed with descriptions of mountain scenery that at times enchant and at others over-awe the soul. I became so deeply interested in the volume as I walked along, that I perceived not the frightful peril towards which I was advancing. All of a sudden—while my eyes were riveted upon the book, and I had no thought for anything besides its absorbing, riveting interest—I was startled by a loud cry warning me of danger. But it was too late—or rather perhaps the cry itself accelerated the mischief which it strove to prevent: for bounding forwards with the sudden impression that some peril threatened me from behind, I fell over that precipice."

"Good heavens, Clarine!" ejaculated Lady Octavian, horrified at the bare idea.

"Yes—it is all too true!" continued Mademoiselle Volney. "I had advanced towards a spot where the railing was broken away: it has since been repaired. I fell over: but the outstretching trunk of a tree growing forth from the side of the chasm, caught me about a dozen feet below the edge. You may conceive the wild terror that filled my brain as hanging over the trunk of that tree, I looked down into the fearful gulf, along the depth of which a stream was eddying and foaming. But succour was nigh. He whose well-meant warning had pealed upon my ear, lowered himself down by means of the roots growing out of the side of the precipice. I remember that as I looked up and saw him hanging above me, sustained only by those frail and uncertain means of support, the dizziness which had before prevailed in my brain amounted to a torturing frenzy. I did not immediately faint—but I have lost the recollection of the precise means that were adopted by my deliverer to save me, and himself too, from our perilous position. I however recollect that when at length safe on the firm land above, I fell into a swoon. On slowly coming back to consciousness, I found my deliverer hanging over me. When I tell you, Zoe, that he is the handsomest of men—at least in my eyes—that he is gifted with a rare intelligence—that his manners are fascinating—that his conversation has charms such as I never experienced before——"

"I understand you, my sweet friend," murmured Zoe mournfully: for as it now proved to be a tale of love to which she was thus listening, she was most painfully reminded of that love of her's which had at first been her joy but had since proved the source of so much misery.

"Yes, I love him—love him passionately!" resumed Clarine, with a violent burst of feeling. "But I forgot—I am wandering from the continuous routine of my narrative! My deliverer knew who I was: he had been in this neighbourhood a day or two previous to the adventure which thus threw us together; and I gathered from what he said that I had been pointed out to him. I could not find words to express my gratitude for the service he had rendered me at the peril of his own life; and I invited him to the Chateau that he might receive my father's thanks likewise. But he declined; and in the gentlest manner he counselled me not to inform my father of what had happened,—arguing that it was useless to distress him on account of a danger that was passed. I considered that one who had rescued me from destruction had a right to proffer his advice; and I promised to follow it. Besides, my thoughts were all in such confusion that I had not the power to deliberate calmly with myself. We parted—and on returning to the Chateau, I did my best to compose my troubled feelings. My father did not return home till the dinner-hour: he was wearied and ill—he had evidently been rambling far—and thus if I had experienced any inclination to act contrary to the advice of my unknown deliverer, my father's state of mind and body would have rendered me obedient to that well-meant advice. I therefore said nothing on the subject. For the next two or three days my father was confined to his bed; and to distress him under such circumstances with the revelation of my adventure, was now totally out of the question. I continued in attendance upon him; and when he was restored to health again, it was too late to mention the incident."

"Confess the truth, my dear Clarine," said Zoe, with a sweet melancholy smile: "that handsome stranger had on the very first occasion obtained more or less influence over your heart as well as over your mind?"

"It is true—I believe that it is true," responded Clarine: "for his image was constantly in my thoughts—so that even when by myself, I would blush at the idea of so incessantly thinking of the handsome countenance which I had seen bending over me when recovering from my state of unconsciousness after my rescue from that frightful peril. Nevertheless, solemnly do I assure you that when next I walked out again, after my father's recovery, I had not the slightest expectation of meeting my handsome unknown deliverer. And yet we met. It was in quite a different direction from where we first encountered each other—two miles away from this spot which is so close by the scene of my peril and my deliverance. He approached me in a manner in which kindness and courtesy were blended, as if he felt that circumstances had placed us on a friendly footing. Almost his very first question was whether I had followed his advice in respect to my father?—and I answered that I had. We walked together for about half an hour,—the time flying so quickly that it appeared to me as if we had only been a few brief minutes together. When we were about to separate, he delicately hinted that I ought not now to mention our acquaintance to my father; for that if I did, I must necessarily explain how it commenced, and then he would chide me for having kept the matter secret at all. I have said that my deliverer spoke with the utmost delicacy of language; and it was also with a mingled entreaty and diffidence in his tone: but nevertheless a pang shot through my heart—I felt hurt—I should even have been indignant, were it not that I remembered that I owed my life to him, and that he had as magnanimously perilled his own to save it. He saw what was passing in my mind: he even looked pleased—he seized my hand—he said that he comprehended the natural delicacy of my thoughts and my sense of propriety—he implored me not to be incensed against him, for that he would explain his meaning and his object in beseeching me to keep the seal of silence upon my lips. I asked for that explanation at once: he wished to postpone it until the morrow. I then said to him, as nearly as I can recollect, the following words:—'You have saved my life, Sir, and you have every claim upon my gratitude. Of that gratitude I have the liveliest sense; but my own idea of propriety must not be absorbed therein—nor the duty that I owe towards my father. If you purpose to remain in this neighbourhood, and we stand a chance of meeting again, I must assuredly mention to my father the acquaintance which I have had the honour to form.'—It was thus that I spoke."

"And you spoke wisely and well!" exclaimed Zoe, in a tone of enthusiasm. "I am delighted to hear that such was your conduct, Clarine. It was dignified and becoming, without the slightest sacrifice of that gratitude which you owed to the saviour of your life."

"Yes—it was thus I spoke," said Mademoiselle Volney; "and my deliverer looked distressed. He paced to and fro on the spot where we had halted: I began to be alarmed that I had fallen in with some unworthy character, especially as I now recollected that he had not even mentioned his name nor where he was living, nor what business had brought him into that neighbourhood.—'Do you,' he at length said, 'insist upon knowing who I am?'—'I do,' I answered, 'if there be any chance of our meeting again.'—Then he told me a tale of how he had been engaged in a political conspiracy—how he had been obliged to flee from Paris—and how he had sought this distant and secluded neighbourhood in the hope that he might dwell unrecognised here for a few weeks, while his influential friends in the capital exerted all their interest to hush up the matter. He added that he was personally known to my father, whom he had seen at Fontainebleau a few years back, when he was a youth; and that therefore if he now presented himself to my sire, the latter would be endangering his own safety by not surrendering him up to justice. Finally he informed me that his name was Claude Masson; that he was a gentleman of wealth and excellent family: that he had no doubt his friends would shortly succeed in smoothing down the temporary difficulties which beset his path; and he therefore threw himself completely on my mercy."

"And what response did you make, my dear Clarine?" inquired Zoe.

"I at once assured him," replied Mademoiselle Volney, "that not for worlds would I do aught that should injure a hair of his head; that therefore I would keep profoundly secret his presence in the neighbourhood, as well as all he had just been telling me; but that inasmuch as I must of necessity, under circumstances, remain silent even to my own father, it would be the height of impropriety on my part to converse with M. Claude Masson again. Such were the terms in which I spoke; and then, with a salutation which I afterwards fancied to have been too coldly distant towards one who had saved my life, I hastened away. Some days passed; and I purposely avoided going out for fear of meeting M. Masson. And yet, dear Zoe——But you will blame me for my weakness——And yet, I say, in my heart, did I long to behold him again! Can you understand these contradictory sentiments? I feared, yet I longed——I dreaded, yet I wished——I trembled, yet I hoped!"

"Yes, my sweet friend," said Zoe, in a soft murmuring voice; "I can understand you—Oh! I can understand you! You loved—and love is a sentiment compounded of a thousand contradictions: it is the eccentricity of the soul, as other strange fantastic ways are the eccentricities of the disposition or the manner. How often, when one loves, is the duty opposed to the inclination!—how often does a sense of delicacy and propriety urge in one direction and the heart's tendency in another! But pray proceed, my sweet Clarine—and tell me how progressed this love-affair—for a love-affair it assuredly is!"

"Several days passed, as I just now said," continued Mademoiselle Volney: "and my rambles had been confined to the garden belonging to the Chateau. At length one morning, immediately after breakfast, my father gave me a bank-note for a thousand francs—which, as you know, is forty pounds sterling of your English money—and he asked me to proceed to the village and pay one or two little bills which had just been sent in. I accordingly set out: I reached the village—and I subsequently remembered that on the outskirts I took a few pence from my reticule to give to a poor woman who implored alms. Then I hastened on, and reached the first shop to which my errand led me: but on thrusting my hand into the reticule, I found that the bank-note was lost. I sped back to the spot where I had encountered the poor woman: but she was no longer there—nor was the bank-note anywhere to be seen. I was sorely distressed: for at that time I believed that my father had really lost his property, and that his means were very limited: I therefore fancied that this would be a very serious loss for him. Besides, I feared that he would charge me with negligence; and altogether I was much afflicted. Suddenly I looked up on hearing a footstep approach: Claude Masson stood before me. I was seized with confusion. In a voice of gentle melancholy—as if pleading for permission to address me—he inquired the cause of my tribulation. I scarcely know in what hurried or bewildered words I explained the occurrence.—'The wind,' he exclaimed, 'blows to this side of the road; and you, Mademoiselle, seem to have been searching on the other.'—Then he hastened in the direction which he had indicated; and suddenly returning towards me, he said, 'Behold the note. I will not avail myself of the little service I thus render you, to intrude any longer on your presence.'—Thus speaking, he hastened away. I felt pained and grieved at the abruptness of his flight: I blamed myself for having spoken too severely to him when last we met: I began to fancy that my conduct was altogether tinged with ingratitude. I sighed profoundly: and again to confess the truth, dear Zoe, I wished that he had remained. However, I held in my hand the bank-note; and I proceeded to execute the commissions entrusted to me by my father. But as I was issuing from one of the shops, I was accosted by the poor woman whom I had previously relieved; and she inquired if I had lost anything? I asked her what she meant: she repeated the question:—a strange idea struck me: it was accompanied by a sensation as if I were experiencing a sudden fright. In terms as confused as those in

which I had ere now spoken to Claude Masson, I faltered out something about a bank-note for a thousand francs. That poor but honest woman at once presented me with the note I had lost, and which I immediately perceived to be slightly of a different colour from that which M. Masson had placed in my hand. I cannot describe the feelings which seized upon me as I took that note; and it was not until I had observed that the poor woman began to regard me somewhat suspiciously, that I regained my self-possession. Then I placed a liberal reward in her hand—and hurried away. I was struck by the generosity of Claude Masson's conduct—a generosity too that was blended with so much delicacy: for little, doubtless, had he anticipated that the real note which was lost would ever be restored to my hand. But, Oh! to think that I now lay under a pecuniary obligation to him! It would have been humiliating, were it not that there was something in the way in which the transaction took place that prevented me from feeling my pride to be humbled. And, after all, I could restore him the note! But I knew not where he lived; and I dared not—for my promise' sake, and with due regard to Claude's safety—name the incident to my father. What was I to do? I must meet him once again: nay, more—I must purposely throw myself in his way: I must seek an opportunity to encounter him. And I did so. For three or four days I rambled everywhere about the neighbourhood—but without seeing him. At length, one afternoon, we suddenly met at the angle of yonder grove which you see, my dear Zoe, about half a mile to the right of the village-church. I had flattered myself that I should have been enabled to address him with calmness and fortitude: but now that the instant for putting me to the test had come, all my self-possession abandoned me. I was full of confusion. Claude Masson took my hand and gazed earnestly upon my countenance.—'Little as we are acquainted,' he said, in a voice that was soft and low, 'I feel as if I had known you for many, many long years.'—For a few instants I had abandoned him my hand, unconscious of what I was doing: I now snatched it away: but I was trembling violently. Then—more instinctively than because I actually remembered the object for which I had sought this meeting—I drew forth the bank-note and proffered it to him. He started—he blushed—he saw that his generous stratagem had been discovered. I faltered out words of thanks:—how could I do otherwise?—and I know not how it was, but I presently found myself seated by his side on the bank that skirts the grove, and listening to the language of love which he was breathing in my ear. He told me that he had seen me every day since last we met—that he had followed me at a distance, content to obtain a glimpse of my form—and that he had taken care I should not perceive I was thus followed. Oh, all the tender things he said to me!—yet in language so delicate—in terms so replete with an honest manly frankness, that it was impossible I could feel offended! But all the time my brain was in a sort of whirl; and I had no power of calm deliberation. I know not how we parted——Yes," added Clarine, bending down her blushing countenance, "I remember that when he besought and implored me to be there at the same hour on the following day, I did not refuse him—I suffered him to understand that his request would be granted. It was not until I was again at the Chateau, and in mine own chamber, that I had a right comprehension of everything that had taken place. Then—I must candidly confess the truth—whatsoever regrets I might have experienced at the course I was pursuing unknown to my father, were absorbed in the delicious sense of loving and being beloved. You see, Zoe, that I am telling you everything—I am speaking with frankness and candour—I am unbosoming myself completely unto you. Oh! do you not think I was very weak——"

"Proceed, dear Clarine," said Lady Octavian: "proceed—and let me hear the result."

"After that meeting," resumed Mademoiselle Volney, "we met frequently—frequently: yet on each occasion I thought to myself that I was doing wrong—very wrong! But, alas! love exercised its spell-like influence over me; and I could not command the courage which was requisite for saying the word that was to pronounce our separation. And then too, my dear Zoe, I must not forget to observe that Claude Masson was constantly assuring me the time would soon come when concealment and disguise would be no longer necessary—when he would be enabled openly to proclaim his presence in that district and make himself known to my father—and that then he would reveal his love for me and claim my hand. You see, dear Zoe, it was a delicious dream in which I was cradled—a state of existence so different from that which I had been lately leading—so new to me, that to have returned to the monotony and the solitude of my former mode of life, would have been the destruction of my happiness: it would have been suicidal in respect to my own heart. Thus weeks passed away——"

"And where did Claude Masson live all this while?" inquired Lady Octavian Meredith.

"At a cottage about four miles distant—at least so he informed me," answered Clarine. "Ah! you may conceive the precautions which he constantly took to avoid meeting my father or any one who might chance to know him! And I too had to take precautions in joining him at our trysting-places: but these were not so very difficult—my father never asked me whither I was going nor where I had been: he seemed to take no note of my actions. And sometimes, dear Zoe, when I reflected on all this, I thought to myself that my father was placing illimitable confidence in me, and that I was betraying it. But then, on the other hand, I persuaded myself that this very confidence on my father's part was as much as to abandon me to the discretionary power of catering for my own happiness. I have no doubt that you look upon such an idea as the most miserable sophistry on my part: but if the love which I experience be the same as the love which is felt by others, I am convinced that it is in the very nature of love itself to suggest expedients and even conjure up arguments that are in precise accordance with its own aims, views, or circumstances."

"This is true, Clarine," said Lady Octavian: "the voice of nature speaks a common and universal language through the medium of the heart's love."

"One day," continued Clarine, "my father told me that you would probably become my companion for a while; and to confess the truth I was at first more vexed than pleased—though I did my best to appear grateful to my parent and to seem satisfied at the arrangement that he was making with the best of motives on my behalf. I was told that you were an invalid: I thought therefore that you would be much in your own chamber, and that I should still find leisure to meet him who had become so dear to me. You arrived at the Chateau; and I immediately conceived a friendship for you—a friendship which has ripened into love. Yes, dear Zoe——"

At this instant, Mademoiselle Volney stopped short; and Lady Octavian Meredith instantaneously comprehended wherefore: for M. Volney was approaching from the distance.

"He means to accost us," said Clarine after a few instants' pause. "I must compose myself——Another time I will finish my narrative."

CHAPTER CV.

THE GALLERY IN THE CHATEAU.

M. VOLNEY approached his daughter and Lady Octavian; and he offered to escort them either for a continuation of their walk, or back to the Chateau. Zoe, to whom the choice was especially addressed, decided upon the latter: for she was fearful of rambling too far. During the walk homeward, it was evident that M. Volney strove to converse in a gayer strain than heretofore, and that he sought to make up by present attentions for any remissness on that score of which he had been previously guilty.

On arriving at the Chateau, M. Volney did not instantaneously repair to his study: but he remained in the drawing-room to converse with his daughter and Zoe. He asked them to play upon the piano—he spoke with an unusual degree of tender kindness to Clarine—he was evidently striving also to render himself sociable to Zoe. There could be little doubt that this was the result of a resolve which he had adopted, and which must have arisen from the reflection that it was his duty to sacrifice his own feelings somewhat for the sake of others. Besides, he had promised Clarine that in future he should think less of himself and more of her than he had previously done. In the afternoon the worthy village-priest called; and on being asked to stay to dinner, he accepted the invitation. He did not take his departure until ten o'clock in the evening: the usual period for retiring to rest soon afterwards arrived; and thus the ladies had as yet found no opportunity of renewing that discourse which had been interrupted in the morning.

But now that Clarine had determined to make a confidante of Lady Octavian Meredith, she experienced an anxious yearning to complete the narrative which she had commenced and to place her friend in full possession of all the circumstances which regarded her love and him who was its object. Therefore, so soon as M. Volney had retired, Clarine said to Lady Octavian, "If you do not feel any particular inclination to seek your couch immediately, come to my chamber, dear Zoe, for half-an-hour; and I will conclude the history which my father's presence interrupted in the morning."

Zoe at once signified her readiness to comply with this request, which was indeed quite in accordance with the promptings of her own curiosity; and she added, "I will first dismiss my maid for the night, and in a few minutes I will join you in your chamber."

The ladies now temporarily separated,—repairing to their own rooms. Zoe dispensed with the attendance of the maid whose turn it was to minister unto her; and shortly after the abigail had retired, she issued forth from her chamber. At that very instant she beheld a form—the form of a man—emerge from the door of the oratorio; and at this sudden apparition a cry of terror thrilled from Lady Octavian's lips. She staggered as if about to fall: the individual whose presence had thus startled her, and who for a single instant had stood utterly irresolute how to act, bounded forward and caught her in his arms.

"For heaven's sake, compose yourself!" he said in the low quick voice of intensest anxiety. "Compose yourself, I beseech you!"

At that moment Clarine rushed forth from her chamber; and clasping her hands in wild terror, she said in a hasty excited whisper, "Oh, this imprudence—this madness, after all that I have written to you!"

But now another door opened higher up the passage; and M. Volney hurried forth with a light in his hand. A piercing shriek burst from the lips of Clarine—and she fell senseless upon the floor. Zoe—now completely recovered from her own alarm—sprang forward to raise her friend up: but she was anticipated by the stranger who had emerged from the chapel——though a stranger we can scarcely call him, inasmuch as Zoe had by this time conjectured that he could be none other than Claude Masson. And who but he could have so tenderly raised up the inanimate form of Mademoiselle Volney?—who but he could have gazed with such deep anxiety on her marble countenance, and then flung such deprecating, entreating looks towards her father?

But what words can depict the ghastly horror which the countenance of M. Volney himself displayed as he stopped short just outside the threshold of his own chamber? As if transfixed to the spot, he gazed in frightful consternation upon this scene. The light which he held in his hand, appeared to be illuminating the features of a corpse, so deadly pale was he—so ashy white were his lips. Zoe was horrified, at the same time that she was too much bewildered for deliberate reflection.

All of a sudden it appeared as if M. Volney recovered his self-possession: for he advanced slowly towards the spot in front of the chapel-doors; and he said with a stern voice, "What means this intrusion here?"

"Let the truth be told—yes, let it be proclaimed at once!" cried he who was supporting in his arms the still inanimate form of Clarine. "I love your daughter, M. Volney—I adore her! She loves me in return! For heaven's sake let your animosity cease towards me!"

"She loves you?" exclaimed M. Volney, with a sort of terrific cry that had wildness, horror, and mournfulness in its accents. "Wretched Clarine! wretched Delorme!"—and springing forward, he tore his daughter, as if frantically, from the Viscount's embrace.

What a revelation had just been made to Lady Octavian Meredith's ear! Claude Masson was none other than the Viscount Delorme; and how much that was hitherto mysterious was now suddenly cleared up! For Clarine's lover was tall, slender, and symmetrically formed: a glance showed Zoe that over his boots he wore a pair of those list shoes which are common amongst the French peasantry; and hence the noiselessness of his steps as she had seen him pass along the corridor: for that it *was* he whose appearance had so much alarmed her, she had not now the slightest doubt.

We have said that M. Volney tore his inanimate daughter with frenzied violence from the arms of the Viscount Delorme; and the anguished father was bearing her towards her own chamber, when the young nobleman sprang forward, and catching him by the arm, exclaimed in a quick excited tone, "I know what is uppermost in your mind ——but by heaven! you are wrong—and I can prove it!"

Clarine now suddenly regained her senses. For a moment her eyes swept their looks wildly around: but instantaneously comprehending everything that had passed, she threw herself at her father's feet, stretching her clasped hands towards him, and crying, "Pardon! pardon!"

M. Volney pressed his hand in anguish to his brow; and Zoe even fancied that a sob came from his lips.

"Yes—by her side do I kneel," said the Viscount Delorme: "by the side of this beloved one do I place myself—likewise to implore your pardon!"

"Rise—rise!" exclaimed M. Volney: "rise, I command—I entreat you! And follow me hither. —Lady Octavian," he added, perceiving that Zoe was about to retire to her own chamber from motives of delicacy, "have the goodness to accompany us: for as you have seen so much, you may be a witness of all the rest!"

M. Volney led the way into the drawing-room, followed by the Viscount and Clarine: while Zoe, after a few instants' hesitation, entered likewise. Clarine now threw herself in Lady Octavian's arms, and wept convulsively upon her bosom.

"M. Volney," said Alfred Delorme, hastening forwards and addressing Clarine's father in a low but quick and earnest voice, "I beseech you to give utterance to the word—the one word of consent—which may spare your daughter so much misery! Say it, sir, I entreat you! The horrible suspicion you entertained is wholly unfounded—— and I repeat I can prove it!"

"Prove it? It is impossible!" said M. Volney, trembling all over with a deep concentrated excitement. "But even if you *could*, there are reasons —reasons——" and he gasped for breath.

"No, no, M. Volney," exclaimed Alfred: "you will not be implacable towards the son for his father's crimes! As for the proof, it is here—— I have it——Pardon me for showing you a document only too well calculated to renew the affliction and the bitterness of past miseries! But it is absolutely necessary you should so far control your feelings as to peruse this letter."

Thus speaking, the Viscount Delorme handed M. Volney a paper which he had hastily drawn forth from a pocket-book; and then he turned towards Clarine who was now regaining some little command over her own feelings—thanks to the kind and encouraging words that Zoe was murmuring in her ears.

"Oh, Alfred! dearest Alfred!" whispered Clarine to her lover; "how could you possibly have been guilty of this imprudence after the letter which I wrote you declaring that we must separate for ever?"

"And think you that I could consent thus to separate?" responded the Viscount, in that low voice of tenderness which likewise being half-reproachful, was sufficient to convince Zoe of the depth and sincerity of the love that he entertained for her friend Clarine. "Why did I again seek an interview with you? It was to assure you of the existence of a proof that your father's fearful suspicion is utterly unfounded—and that proof is now in the hands of M. Volney. Behold—he is reading it!"

M. Volney had his back turned towards his daughter, the Viscount, and Zoe: he was bending down towards the chamber-light which he had placed upon the drawing-room table: he was holding the open letter in his hand: but whatsoever feelings might be depicted upon his countenance, could not be discerned by those from whom that countenance was thus averted. Zoe comprehended full well that the letter which the Viscount Delorme had placed in M. Volney's hands, contained some proof that he might with certitude regard Clarine as his own daughter and not the offspring of her mother's illicit amour with the late Viscount. She comprehended likewise that a proper delicacy of feeling had prevented Alfred Delorme from being more explicit in his whispered assurances to Clarine relative to the precise nature of that document.

"God be at least thanked for *this!*" was the ejaculation which suddenly burst from M. Volney's lips: and hastening towards Clarine, he folded her in his arms.

The young lady—perfectly well comprehending that her father was convinced by the weight of the evidence, whatsoever it were, that the letter contained — wound her arms about his neck and sobbed and wept upon his breast. But she sobbed and wept for joy at the thought that the hideous suspicion which her sire had entertained in respect to herself, was cleared up, and that he could now indeed embrace her with the confidence that it was his own lawfully-begotten child whom he was thus folding in his arms. Some words murmuringly uttered came from Clarine's lips; and as they struck her father's ear, they were to him a revelation.

"What! Clarine," he exclaimed; "you comprehend the meaning of all this? You know what suspicion——"

"Yes—I know it, dear father!" murmured his daughter; "I know more than you fancy—and I know everything!"

"Everything?" ejaculated M. Volney with a sudden start, and also with a frightened look sweeping over his countenance. "No, no! it is impossible! Heaven forbid!"—and he shuddered visibly.

"Forgive me, dearest father," said Clarine; and once more she sank upon her knees at his feet.

"What—what is it that you know?" he demanded: and there was something almost fierce in his accents, his looks, and his manner: "what is it that you know? But I am mad—it is impossible!"—and pressing his hand, with a renewal of wild anguish, to his brow, he seemed as if he sought to steady his confused and bewildered ideas.

"I know, dearest father," responded Clarine, frightened by the vehemence of his manner, "the source of all your distresses——And, Oh! bitterly, bitterly have I wept on account of the fall of her whose memory I had tutored myself to love and revere!"

"And who told you all this?" demanded M. Volney abruptly.

"It was the Viscount who told me part, and Marguerite who told me the rest. Oh! blame me not, dearest father," continued Clarine entreatingly: "I feel that I have done wrong in some respects——but if you had not left me so much to myself——"

"Rise, child—rise!" said M. Volney, whose heart was evidently lacerated with a world of conflicting and tumultuous emotions. "It is I who am to blame!—it is I—and not you, my poor child!"

Clarine rose from her suppliant posture: Alfred Delorme stepped forward, and said, "M. Volney, will you not now speak that *one* word of assent which will make us both happy? I have always heard you spoken of as a just, a good, and an upright man——"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Volney with a renewed fierceness of tone and look. "This scene can last no longer—at least not for the present!

Depart, Alfred Delorme—and to-morrow you shall know my decision! Depart, I say!" added M. Volney vehemently: "not another word to me nor to my daughter!—and to-morrow, I repeat, you may come to me——Yes, you may call at the Chateau——and then my decision shall be made known!"

"Oh! let me entreat you," said the Viscount in a voice of the most earnest appeal, "to stifle those feelings of hatred which you have hitherto entertained towards me——"

"Young man, you comprehend me not!" interrupted Clarine's father petulantly: "you cannot penetrate into the depths of my heart! Oh, if you could——But enough! You will perhaps know more to-morrow. Depart——I conjure, I command you!"

"It is not for me," responded the Viscount, "who am an honourable suitor for your daughter's hand——aye, and a suppliant for your consent and good feeling——it is not for me, I say, to oppose your will or rebel against your mandate."

With these words Alfred Delorme bowed with courteous respect to M. Volney: he saluted Zoe in a similar manner: he bent a look of loving tenderness on Clarine; and he quitted the room. For some minutes after his departure M. Volney paced to and fro with agitated steps,—apparently unconscious of the presence of his daughter and Zoe. These two remained together,—Clarine with her arm thrown round her friend's waist—clinging to her with the confidence of one who sought support, solace, and encouragement in the painful state of uncertainty in which the last scene of this strangely wild drama had left her.

At length M. Volney accosted the two ladies; and he said to Clarine, "Sit down, and tell me frankly and faithfully everything that has taken place between yourself and the Viscount——all that you have heard from *his* lips—all that you have heard from the lips of old Marguerite likewise. Stay, Lady Octavian!—I beseech you not to leave us! We look upon you as something more than a friend: my daughter regards you as a sister——and if it be not forcing our affairs upon your attention——"

"Rest assured, M. Volney," replied Lady Octavian Meredith, "that if I were about to quit the room, it was only through motives of delicacy. But if, on the other hand, I can be of the slightest service——"

"You can! you can!" interjected M. Volney, with hasty emphasis.

"Perhaps it may be as well to mention," said Zoe, "that I am already partially the confidante of my friend Clarine. This very morning was she telling me the history of her acquaintance and her love for him whom she then mentioned as Claude Masson, and whom I have this evening for the first time known to be the Viscount Delorme."

"And you would have known everything, dearest Zoe," said Clarine gently, "had we not been interrupted. But my dear father," she continued, turning towards her parent, "with all candour and frankness will I now reveal everything that has taken place. Yet you will chide me——"

"No, I will not chide you, Clarine," said M. Volney: "for there was only too much truth in your words when you declared that I had left you so continuously to your own pursuits."

"Think not for an instant that I intended it as a reproach!" exclaimed Clarine earnestly.

"No, no—I took it not as such," answered M. Volney with kindness: "it was the ingenuous plea on your own behalf which would naturally flow from your lips under such circumstances."

Having thus spoken, M. Volney sate down with the air of one who intended to listen patiently to a narrative which he had asked for. Clarine and Zoe likewise seated themselves; and then the former commenced her explanations. She recited everything she had already stated to Lady Octavian in respect to the incidents which had first thrown her in the way of him who had passed himself off as Claude Masson; and she then continued the thread of her history in the following manner:—

"You, my dear Zoe, arrived at the Chateau some few weeks back; and we speedily became intimate together. You were the companion of my walks: there was no opportunity for me any longer to meet him whom I loved. During this interruption of my intercourse with him, the idea would often steal into my mind that it was perhaps all for the best—and that heaven itself had sent you hither to check me in a career of imprudence with regard to myself and of deceit towards my father. Nevertheless, even while making these reflections, I felt that I loved Claude Masson—as I then believed his name to be—with an affection that could never change; and I consoled myself with the hope that as he loved me with an equal sincerity, he would fulfil his promise of revealing himself to you, my father, the moment the influential friends of whom he had spoken should have rescued him from the perils which he represented as environing himself. One day—when you, dear Zoe, were somewhat indisposed—I repaired to the village to make certain purchases; and on my way homeward I encountered him who was indeed uppermost in my thoughts at the time. Three weeks had passed since last we met: and though I explained to him the cause——indeed, he was already aware of it, for he had seen you and me, Zoe, walking together in the neighbourhood——yet did he somewhat reproach me for what he termed my unwillingness to make an effort to steal forth and meet him at least once during that interval. I was profoundly afflicted by the language which he thus held towards me; and he implored my forgiveness for having wounded my feelings. He said that in a short time he should be in a position to throw off the mask of concealment and openly come forward to claim my hand. He besought that I would now and then grant him an interview. It was in vain that I urged the impossibility of walking forth by myself, now that I had a companion. He was deeply distressed: he spoke despondingly: he declared that such was his affection for me, that he could not endure another long interval of separation. In a word, dear father——but you have promised not to chide me?—for oh! the Viscount is the most loving, the most high-minded, and the most honourable of men——"

"I will not chide you, Clarine," said M. Volney with exceeding gentleness of manner. "Proceed. Shall I help you to that avowal which you hesitate to make?"

"No, father," responded Clarine, almost proudly. "Heaven be thanked! I can look you in the face and declare that——"

"Enough, Clarine!" interrupted M. Volney: and then he emphatically added, "Not for a single instant did I suspect the honour or purity of my child. Proceed, Clarine. You consented to grant your admirer an occasional interview within the walls of this Chateau?"

"Yes—in the chapel," responded Clarine. "I furnished him with the key of the door at the bottom of the staircase at the extremity of the passage; and on four or five occasions did I meet him for a few minutes in the chapel. Rest assured that I should not have for an instant granted these stolen interviews within the sanctity of your dwelling—nor at such an hour, after the household had retired to rest—no, not even in compliance with his earnest pleadings should I have granted these interviews—were it not that I was deeply, deeply anxious to learn the progress of those intercessions which his friends, as I believed at the time, were making on his behalf in Paris. I now come to a very memorable moment of my existence. It was the evening before last that I again met Claude Masson—as I still believed his name to be—in the chapel. He told me that he began to fear our interviews could no longer be snatched thus stealthily—for that he had seen you, dear Zoe, crossing the passage on the previous night as he was hastening towards the staircase at the extremity. He then asked me if I were prepared for a revelation which he was resolved to make, and which could no longer be withheld? I was frightened: I besought him to be candid with me at once. He then said that he must tell me a narrative of the past, of which, as he had discovered, I was hitherto completely ignorant. Without immediately revealing himself, he told me how a certain Viscount Delorme had proved the author of your wretchedness, my dear father——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted M. Volney, with an anguished look: "I can understand full well all that he told you!"

"And then he concluded," added Clarine, herself deeply afflicted at being compelled to make allusions which thus planted fresh daggers in her parent's heart—"and then he concluded by revealing himself to me as Alfred Delorme!"

There was a brief pause—during which M. Volney guarded a profound silence; and Clarine then resumed her narrative in the following manner:—

"Alfred explained to me all the motives of his recent conduct. He said that some five or six years ago he called privately upon you, my dear father, at Fontainebleau, to make you acquainted with the elucidation of the mystery which had previously shrouded his own father's fate; and at the same time he entertained the hope that as so terrible a retribution had overtaken the author of your wrongs, amidst the drifting snows of the Alpine regions, you would not refuse to give your hand in forgiveness, if not in friendship, to himself as the living representative of the perished Viscount. But you *did* refuse!—and Alfred left you with sadness and sorrow in his heart. A few years passed away—during which he travelled in foreign countries; and after a while he visited Spain. He took it into his head to perform a pedestrian tour across the Pyrenees and through the South of France. It was while thus engaged that he arrived a few months back in this neighbourhood. Observing the old Chateau, his curiosity dictated certain inquiries; and he learnt to his astonishment that it was inhabited by a gentleman named Volney, and who had an only daughter. He therefore at once felt convinced that the present tenant of the Chateau must be yourself. He wandered in the vicinage of the house: he caught a glimpse of you in the distance—he beheld me likewise. Often and often," continued the blushing Clarine, "has he breathed the assurance in my ear that the first moment he saw me, he was smitten with a feeling which has since ripened into love. Accident rendered him my deliverer at the precipice of the ravine, as I have already told you; and from that instant he resolved to woo me as his future bride. But he dared not *then* reveal himself to you: he thought that if his love were reciprocated, and if he could win my heart, you would not stand in the way of your daughter's happiness. He saw the necessity of devising some tale to account for his earnestly expressed desire that I should remain silent in respect to the presence of such an individual in the neighbourhood: and therefore, when I pressed him to declare who he was, he adopted the first name which entered his head at the moment. The story of his political perils was a venial fabrication to suit his purposes for the time, to lull my suspicions, and to satisfy my mind. Such were the explanations which the Viscount Delorme gave me the night before last, when I met him in the chapel. You may conceive the feelings with which I listened to all that he then told me: but before I had time to learn what his intentions were, and how he meant to proceed towards yourself, dear father,—the door of the chapel opened and Marguerite made her appearance! I may as well observe, in order to avoid the interruption of my narrative hereafter, that Marguerite (as I learnt that same night, for I knew it not before) was in the habit of occasionally visiting the chapel to say her prayers: for, as you are aware, dear father, her piety borders upon superstition."

"And Marguerite thus surprised you," said M. Volney, "with Alfred Delorme?"

"Yes: and she was more than astonished—she was more than startled: she was horrified!" continued Clarine. "She insisted that the Viscount should at once take his departure. Vainly did he entreat, plead, and remonstrate: Marguerite was resolute; and she vowed that if he departed not at once, she would unhesitatingly make known his presence to you. All the favour that he could obtain was a permission to return on the following evening to explain those intentions which he was about to make known to me at the instant Marguerite so unexpectedly appeared. He went away; and I was left alone with Marguerite. She then began to upbraid me bitterly for what she termed the wickedness of my conduct. I besought her not to speak so harshly: the tears were streaming down my cheeks: she relented—and she embraced me. But she bade me discard the image of Alfred Delorme from my heart: she told me it was criminal to love him—for that you, my dear father, entertained the horrible suspicion——But I will not more directly allude to it! Suffice it to say that

I myself was horrified. I consented—yes, willingly consented, to abide by the dictates of Marguerite's guidance; and she bade me pen a letter to Alfred Delorme, to the effect that everything must be considered to be at an end between us. On this condition—and on this condition only—would she agree to place upon her lips the seal of silence in respect to what had occurred. I penned that letter—yesterday morning I gave it to Marguerite; and last night she left it in the chapel, so that when Alfred Delorme should penetrate thither he might find it. She herself chose not to have an interview with him: she deemed it useless to learn what *had been* his intentions, inasmuch as she felt the impossibility of their being carried out."

"And it was after all Alfred Delorme," said M. Volney, "whom I saw last night stealing along the passage! It was he, too, whom your ladyship"—addressing himself to Zoe—"on two occasions beheld!"

"And now, my dear father," continued Clarine, not pausing to ask a question nor make a comment in respect to the words which M. Volney had just uttered,—"*can* you pardon me for all that I have done? Oh! you know not how my heart was rent when in your study you delivered that solemn injunction in respect to Alfred Delorme! I longed to throw myself at your feet and confess everything: but I dared not! Again I ask, *can* you forgive me?"

"Yes, my dear child—I forgive you!" exclaimed her father: "from the very bottom of my heart do I forgive you!"

Clarine threw herself into her sire's arms; and for several minutes she remained clasped there, weeping upon his breast—and he himself weeping over her. The scene was full of an exquisite pathos: and Zoe was profoundly affected.

"Retire, my love—retire to your own chamber," said M. Volney at length; and then he added with accents of deepest fervour, "And may heaven bless you!"

"But have you nothing more to say to me, dear father?" inquired Clarine, upturning her looks towards M. Volney's countenance, and with an expression of half-surprise, half-affliction on her features. "Will you not put me out of all suspense——"

"Listen, Clarine!" interrupted her father, who after an instant's air of anguish, suddenly appeared to nerve himself with the fortitude requisite for the utterance of an inflexible decision. "You may as well know the worst at once, and be relieved of all suspense. Clarine, my poor girl—doubly dear to me since that horrible suspicion has been banished from my mind!—your union with the Viscount Delorme is an impossibility. God help thee, my poor child!"

These last words were spoken with the tremulous accents of deepest emotion; and they were followed by a sob which seemed to convulse M. Volney's breast. Clarine bent upon him a look full of unutterable misery; and then she fell senseless in the arms of Lady Octavian. M. Volney, half distracted, flew to fetch restoratives; and when he perceived that his unhappy daughter was slowly returning to consciousness, he pressed Zoe's hand with nervous violence,—saying, "I cannot wait till she is completely restored! For heaven's sake soothe—console—strengthen her! But remember, Lady Octavian—remember!—that decision of mine is inflexible!"

And with these words M. Volney rushed from the room.

CHAPTER CVI.

THE ALPINE TRAGEDY.

It was after breakfast on the following morning—a meal however at which Clarine was not present, and of which neither M. Volney nor Zoe scarcely partook—that he requested her ladyship to join him presently in his study, as he wished to speak to her on matters of the utmost importance. Zoe hastened first of all to see whether her ministrations were required by Clarine, who was ill in bed; and in about a quarter of an hour she repaired to the study. She found M. Volney pacing to and fro, not with a visible excitement and agitation—but in a slow solemn manner, and with a deep dejection of the looks. He placed a chair for Lady Octavian's accommodation: he then sate down at his desk; and he said in a mournful voice, "How fares my daughter now?"

"My opinion is still the same, M. Volney," answered Zoe. "As I told you the instant we met at the breakfast-table, Clarine has received a shock which she will never recover—unless joyous intelligence be speedily conveyed to her. She will die of a broken heart, M. Volney: for all her happiness is centered in her love for Alfred Delorme!"

The pallor which already overspread the French gentleman's countenance, deepened into ghastliness: it was a paleness like that of the dead: it appeared as if all the vital blood had suddenly quitted his body. Even his lips became ashy white: a fearful struggle was evidently taking place within him. In a few moments he rose from his seat—opened the door of the study—and looked forth into the passage with which it communicated. Satisfied that no one was there, he closed the outer door carefully: then he shut an inner door, which was covered with green baize and which usually stood open.

"Be not alarmed, Lady Octavian, at these precautions," he said, slowly returning to his seat: "but I am about to speak to you on a subject for which there must be no listeners."

If Zoe were not exactly alarmed, she nevertheless felt a chill strike glacially to her heart: for there was something so fearful in M. Volney's looks at the moment—something so full of ghastly horror, that it was only too well calculated to produce this effect. He resumed his seat: he drew his chair closer towards her: and he said in a voice which had now changed from a deep mournfulness to a sepulchral hollowness, "That which I am about to tell you, has never yet been breathed to mortal ears; and from your lips must it never go forth again. I need your advice in the awful dilemma in which I am placed: I feel myself totally unable to act according to the guidance of my own soul's promptings. Strong as my mind has hitherto been, the incidents which are now passing have reduced it to a more than childhood's weakness. You, Lady Octavian, have shown yourself so good, so kind, so affectionate towards my daughter—you possess too so much sterling sense—that I readily leave myself in your hands. But in order that you may be enabled to assist me with your judgment and direct my proceedings, I must tell you everything."

M. Volney paused: Zoe had no reply to make—at least not for the present: but she waited with intensest curiosity, and also with a solemn feeling of interest, for the explanations that were to come.

"First of all," resumed M. Volney, "let me inform you of the nature of that letter which Alfred Delorme placed in my hand last night. It was a letter written by my wretched wife to Alfred's father: it was after the birth of my daughter—and by its tenour it fully proved that although they had for some time loved each other with that illicit, fatal affection of their's, yet that it was only a few days prior to the writing of that letter that their love had become downright criminal. Yes—the evidence that such is the fact is incontrovertible; and therefore was I enabled last night to embrace Clarine for the first time with the conviction that in her I was veritably embracing a daughter! And thus, too, the barrier which my hideous suspicion had raised up against the possibility of an alliance between herself and Alfred Delorme, has ceased to exist: but there is another—*another*," added M. Volney, with difficulty suppressing a burst of anguish,—"unless indeed by your judgment and under your guidance, Lady Octavian, it can be surmounted."

"And this other barrier?" said Zoe, still in a state of deep and solemn suspense.

"Listen to me," said M. Volney; "and I will tell you a tale which you can little expect to hear. You are already sufficiently acquainted with past events to enable me to take up my narrative from a particular point without any prefatory details. I therefore wish to direct your attention to that period—that fatal period—when I suddenly discovered my wife's infidelity. She died of a broken heart,—overwhelmed with shame and disgrace,—as you have heard. The Viscount Delorme—that false friend who became the author of so much misery—fled to avoid my vengeance: for I sent a friend to provoke him to a mortal duel—a duel in which I had resolved that one if not both should perish. But my mind was made up: I was determined to have vengeance: nothing but the blood of that man could appease my furiously excited passions! Heaven knows that up to that instant my character had never displayed itself in a ferocious light—my disposition had never developed savage instincts. But I had experienced a wrong so stupendous that only an adequate vengeance could give rest to my perturbed and excited spirit. At least such was my idea. By some means, which I need not now pause to describe, I got upon the Viscount's track—and I at once pretexted an inclination for a change of residence to an Italian clime. I took my infant daughter and Marguerite with me. Oh, often and often did I wonder within myself wherefore I entertained the least love for that child, and wherefore I did not cast her forth from me as the possible offspring of that illicit love which had dishonoured me. But when I looked upon Clarine's innocent countenance, there was a yearning tenderness in my heart which at least forbade me from being unkind to the babe even if my soul did not absolutely cleave to it. It was the voice of nature whispering, though faintly, within me: for last night has proven that she is indeed my daughter! Good God, if I had discarded the child—if I had repudiated her!—Oh, what guilt! what sorrow! But, thank heaven, of *that* crime I am innocent!"

A look of grateful fervour, as these last words were uttered, succeeded the strong shudder with which the immediate previous ones were spoken; and Zoe herself shuddered—for she had a presentiment that her ears were about to drink in some terrible revelation.

"Yes—I undertook that journey," continued M. Volney, after a pause; "and at every halting-place I secretly but diligently instituted those inquiries which enabled me to follow up the clue that I had originally obtained. Marguerite fancied that it was my unsettled mind which caused me thus to wander forth for long hours together: but it was in reality for the purpose of making the inquiries to which I have just alluded. At length the intelligence I received led me to Mount St. Bernard—that portion of the Alpine range which overlooks sunny Italy. We reached the Hospice: but now all clue to the Viscount Delorme seemed suddenly lost. He had not visited the Hospice; and yet I had the positive certainty that he had commenced the ascent of the mountain. I wandered about for hours and hours together in that dangerous region of snows and glaciers; and the faithful Marguerite was more than ever frightened on my account. Yes—I dared a thousand perils while hunting a man on those Alpine heights with as much tenacity of purpose as ever the hardy mountaineer displayed in chasing the chamois. Thus several days passed; and at length one forenoon, amidst an almost blinding sleet, I beheld a single horseman toiling up a steep slope. It was he—my mortal enemy—the object of my search—the man whom I was hunting—the Viscount Delorme!"

"M. Volney," said Zoe, shuddering, and with a countenance pale as death, "tell me no more—I beseech you to tell me no more! I dare not anticipate what the rest of your narrative might be: but it seems as if I had already heard too much!"

"Lady Octavian," said the French gentleman, in a voice that was scarcely audible, "I beseech you to hear the rest! You must know everything—or else you will be unable to assist me with your judgment. Nothing must be concealed from you—nothing withheld. If you were left to conjecture, it might fall short of the terrible, the astounding truth! Besides," added M. Volney, "a few words—a very few words will explain the rest—and these words shall be quickly said."

"No, no!" gasped Zoe: but her accents were even less audible than those in which the Frenchman had just been speaking.

"It was amidst that cloud of beating sleet, mingled with snow-flakes," continued M. Volney, heedless of Lady Octavian's weak and feeble interruption, "that the horseman advanced. I stood with my back towards him until he was on a level with me: then in consequence of the suddenness with which I turned towards him, his horse started, shied, and flung the Viscount from his back. The scene was terrible. The animal reared

—fell back upon its haunches—and slipping with its hinder hoofs, was in an instant over the precipice. The fearful cry which it sent up from the tremendous depth into which it was plunging down, was like the voices of a dozen human beings all concentrated in the horrible concord of one wild terrific yell of agony. At the same instant my knee was upon the breast of Delorme—my hand grasped his throat. The rage of ten thousand fiends was boiling in the hell of my soul: there was the strength of an iron vice in the fingers that were tightening about my enemy's neck. Desperate were his struggles: but he had no more chance in contending with me, than if he were an infant in the hands of a giant. And yet naturally he was far stronger than I—more powerful of form—more vigorous of arm and limb. For it was the raging pandemonium of my vindictive fury that rendered me at the time invincible—irresistible—dominant,—and which gave me the strength of ten thousand. A few moments, and I started up with a revulsion of unutterable horror in my soul: for that vice-like gripe of mine had only relaxed its hold upon the Viscount's throat when the last breath and sigh of life had come gurgling from his lips. He was a corpse and I—I, Lady Octavian Meredith, stood there, amidst that wild Alpine scene, a branded murderer!"

Zoe gazed, with a ghastly terror and a horror-stricken stupefaction of the feelings, upon the equally ghastly face of M. Volney. She was transfixed to her seat: she seemed turned into a statue: all the blood had curdled in her veins. Her lips were apart—but no breath came through them—it was held in awful suspense: her bosom remained upheaved, as if it would never sink with respiration again.

"And now, Lady Octavian," continued M. Volney, still in a hollow voice, "you know my fearful secret. I have not shrunk from trusting you with it: I know that you will not betray me. It was a vengeance which I wreaked; and though before I perpetrated the deed I considered myself justified in seeking the deadliest revenge for my outraged honour and my wrecked happiness—though all the world too would hold that I was thus justified—yet frankly do I confess that my conscience has reproached me ever since the moment that I stood a murderer amidst that wild Alpine scenery! Nevertheless, I repeat, I know that you will not betray me. But let me continue——I have only a few more words to say. I took from the person of the Viscount whatsoever papers might prove his identity; and I dragged the corpse to a spot where I saw that the drifting snow was accumulating fast. In a few minutes the body of the Viscount was completely enveloped in the winding-sheet which nature's hand wove in countless myriads of flakes around it;—and I knew that my secret was safe. And so it proved. Several years elapsed ere the corpse was disinterred from its mausoleum of snow by one of the dogs of the Hospice; and several more years elapsed ere the Marchioness and Alfred were led to the elucidation of the lost Viscount's fate. Alfred came to me at Fontainebleau to report the discovery—to entreat my forgiveness towards his father's memory—and to beseech that there might be reconciliation between the two families; for he said that if I received him with rancour, he should feel as if his father's sins were being visited anathematisingly upon himself. I saw that the young man suspected not his sire had met his death otherwise than by an accident which often overtakes travellers amidst the Alpine mountains;—but yet I was alarmed! Conscience, Lady Octavian," added M. Volney in a solemn tone, "makes cowards of us all!"

There was another brief pause—a pause which Zoe could not interrupt; for she was still a prey to almost overwhelming feelings: but the French gentleman soon continued in the following strain:—

"I refused to give the hand of friendship to Alfred Delorme. It was not, Lady Octavian, because I in reality visited upon himself the sins of his father: it was because I could not bear the idea of meeting, much less encouraging the visits of one whose presence would continuously remind me that his sire had met his death at my hand. And then too, the horrible suspicion existed in my mind that the same blood which flowed in the veins of Alfred Delorme might also flow in the veins of Clarine; and I recoiled in consternation from the idea that it was possible for them to become enamoured of each other. Thus, in order to rid myself of Alfred Delorme—in the hope of preventing him from seeking me out for the future—I roughly and rudely repelled his conciliatory overtures. I assumed the air and speech of vindictiveness: I sent him away saddened and dejected. And then I lost no time in abandoning my home and taking Clarine with me—it being my intention to bury ourselves in some deep solitude. It was amongst the Pyrenean regions or the wilds of Catalonia that I thought of settling our future abode: but on reaching the adjacent village and on beholding this Chateau, I conceived the place and neighbourhood to be sufficiently suited for my purpose. It has however pleased heaven to direct the footsteps of Alfred Delorme hither; and that which I had done so much to avoid—that which I have so much striven to prevent, has taken place. They have met—and they love each other!"

There was another brief pause: and then M. Volney concluded thus:—

"One tremendous barrier has been broken down: it ceases to exist. That letter, which Alfred Delorme must doubtless have found amongst his deceased father's papers, when taking possession of his ancestral home—or which might have been in possession of the Marchioness who so tenderly reared him—has convinced me that my wife became not completely criminal until after the birth of Clarine. *That* barrier therefore is destroyed. But how can I recognise Alfred Delorme as my son-in-law?—how can I extend the hand of friendship towards him—that hand which took his father's life! Counsel—advise me, Lady Octavian. I pledge myself to fulfil your injunctions, whatever they may be! But as far that terrible secret of mine——"

"It is safe, M. Volney—it is safe with me," replied Zoe, in a low voice of deep solemnity. "You will not expect me to offer any comment upon that terrible portion of your narrative. But in respect to Clarine—in respect to the Viscount—I can have no hesitation in offering an opinion. If you insist upon severing them, you will be sacrificing their happiness to the sense of——"

"I understand you, Lady Octavian!" said M. Volney: "to the sense of my own guilt! Yes, yes—it is so! I must not be selfish!"

"No, M. Volney," observed Lady Octavian impressively; "there must be the completest self-abnegation on your part——"

"There shall be—there shall be!" responded the French gentleman. "Poor Clarine! she has already been made too much the victim of my own wretched destiny!"

He rose from his seat, and paced the room for a few instants with agitated steps: his form was bowed—he looked ten years older than he had seemed on the preceding day.

"Yes—they shall be united!" he said, suddenly stopping short in front of Lady Octavian. "Hasten and convey this intelligence to Clarine. The bridal shall take place soon; and afterwards—afterwards," added M. Volney, "I will seek some foreign country—there to dwell for the remainder of my life!"

Zoe could not help compassionating the unhappy man whose crime had arisen from a sense of deepest wrong; and when she issued from his presence, she felt that the tears were streaming down her cheeks. Having composed her feelings somewhat, she sped to Clarine's chamber; and to that young lady did she impart the happy intelligence which she had to convey. We need scarcely add that Zoe respected M. Volney's secret, terrible though it were. Joy—indescribable joy expanded upon Clarine's countenance: the sense of indisposition vanished; and she hastened to apparel herself that she might welcome her lover when he should come, according to appointment, to learn M. Volney's decision.

CHAPTER CVII.

THE DISGUISED ONE.

It was evening—a beautiful evening in the middle of September; and a gentle breeze had succeeded the heat of a day of more than usual sultriness for that period of the year. Queen Indora was walking in the garden attached to her beautiful villa in the neighbourhood of Notting Hill and Bayswater: she was alone, and reflecting upon the incidents of her past life. The purple which blended with the other hues of her garments, indicated that she was in mourning. Her dress was half European, half oriental. She wore the flowing skirt belonging to the feminine garb of the former style: a species of caftan, and the under-garment developing the rich proportions of her bust, were of the Eastern fashion. The jetty masses of her hair hung far down her back, below her waist, and seemed like a thick ebon veil which might be drawn at will over the countenance.

There was a certain degree of pensiveness expressed in the looks of the Queen, which was not however altogether sorrowful. Subjects for mourning and rejoicing were blending in her thoughts: on one side was her father's death—on the other the assurance which she had received from Clement Redcliffe that he would accept her hand. Still Indora was thoughtful: she walked with a slow pace; and when reaching a fountain in the midst of the garden, she stood there gazing upon the flow of the crystal water, and giving way to the reflections that were uppermost in her mind.

From amidst a knot of trees an ominous countenance was surveying her. Without preserving any unnecessary mystery in the present instance, we will at once declare that the individual thus concealed was none other than Barney the Burker. Nothing could be more admirable than the fellow's disguise—nothing more complete than his transmogrification, so to speak. He wore the wig with frizzly curls which the Duke of Marchmont had given him: his countenance was stained duskily with the dye which he had obtained from the same source: he wore spectacles; and a large overhanging moustache concealed the malformation of his upper lip. In respect to apparel, the Burker had a very decent appearance; and he no longer retained the huge club which was wont to be his almost inseparable companion. In this disguise was it that Barney had dared to come up to London; and now for the first time he had penetrated into the grounds of the villa where Queen Indora dwelt.

Little suspected the oriental lady that she was in the close vicinage of one who harboured such evil designs towards her: little likewise did she imagine that the power of her beauty was at that instant exercising its influence over the soul of one of the greatest miscreants in all Christendom. And yet such was the case. The Burker—whose disposition was naturally of a brutal callousness, and who of all men in the world was the least susceptible of a sentiment that could interfere with any business that he had on hand—was now suddenly smitten with a feeling hitherto unknown. It appeared to him as if he had never rightly until this minute comprehended what female beauty was: but now he began to understand what was meant by regular and well chiselled features—by eyes of splendid lustre—by nobly arching brows that gave intelligence and lofty frankness to the countenance—by the magnificent symmetry of shape—and by the blending of all that elegance, gracefulness, and dignity which combined to render Indora at once the fascinating and the queen-like woman she was. Yes—all this did the Burker begin to appreciate; and the brutal ruffianism of his nature was melting under the influence of that supernal loveliness which he was now surveying. Indeed, the eastern lady appeared to him something more than woman: she looked as if she were a goddess: there was something about her which not merely charmed—it likewise overawed; and there was a moment when the miscreant almost felt as if he could rush forth from his ambush, throw himself at her feet, and implore her pardon!

Indora passed away from the vicinage of the fountain; and as the Burker followed with his eyes her slowly retreating form, he thought to himself that never had he before been struck by the beauty which exists in a woman's faultless shape. These hitherto unknown feelings expanded and strengthened within him; and it seemed as if he had suddenly become altogether a different being from what he was. Indora disappeared in a turning of the gravel-walk; and then the Burker asked himself, "What the devil is all this that has come over me? I feel just like a child. I suppose it must be because I havn't got my club as usual; and I'm like a lion without his teeth and claws. And yet that lady *is* uncommon beautiful! I never thought so much before of what a woman's good looks might be."

Here Indora reappeared to the Burker's view: he left off communing with himself—his gaze was once more riveted upon her. As she drew nearer, he beheld an expression of ineffable sadness pass over her countenance: she was thinking of her late father, and the tears trickled down her cheeks. She raised her kerchief to wipe them away; and the Burker was struck by the exquisite modelling of her hand and of as much of the arm as the sleeve of the caftan suffered to be visible. Then she thought of Clement Redcliffe; and a sweet smile played upon her lips, revealing a glimpse of the teeth of ivory whiteness. The Burker literally quivered at the strangeness of these new feelings which had come over him; and again was he on the point of rushing forth and imploring the lady's pardon for the design which he had entertained towards her. But he checked himself: for at the instant his ear caught other footsteps advancing along a neighbouring gravel-walk.

It was Sagoonah, who sought her mistress; and now the Burker beheld that splendid Hindoo woman the dark grandeur of whose beauty was of so high an order, and whose lithe form was of so bayadere a symmetry. The Burker was astonished at the spectacle of this new personification of another style of feminine charms: and as the two walked away together, he followed them with his gaze. But as in his own mind he endeavoured to establish a choice between them, it settled upon Indora. Yet was the rude, brutal heart of this man who was stained with a thousand crimes, and himself a monster of ugliness—deeply touched by both the specimens of oriental beauty which he had thus seen.

"You seek me, my Sagoonah," said Queen Indora, as they slowly walked away from the fountain: "have you any thing to communicate?"

"No, my lady," answered the ayah: "but you gave me permission to join you occasionally when you were alone——"

"Yes, my faithful Sagoonah," rejoined the Queen: "because I have fancied that for the last few days you have been pensive and mournful—or that at least you have had strange fits of abstraction——"

"Oh, no, my lady!" said Sagoonah, lifting her large dark eyes with an air of the most ingenuous candour towards Indora's countenance. "I can assure you that it is not so!—I have already given your ladyship that same assurance!"

"I am glad to hear you repeat it, Sagoonah," remarked the Queen; "because you know that I experience an affection for you. You have served me so truly and faithfully!——But tell me, Sagoonah," asked Indora, thus suddenly interrupting herself, "shall you be glad soon to return to your own native country?"

"I am always happy where your ladyship is," replied the ayah.

"And you will go back, my Sagoonah," proceeded the Queen, now smiling good-naturedly and with a caressing manner,—"you will go back without having lost your heart to any native of this metropolis?"

Sagoonah stooped suddenly down to pluck a flower that grew on the edge of the border which Indora and herself were passing at the time; and then she looked up into the countenance of her mistress with the same ingenuously frank expression as before. For an instant Indora was smitten with a suspicion—on account of the incident of the flower, which had a sort of petulance in it—that the words she had used in good-humoured jocularity had really touched a chord vibrating in the ayah's heart: but this idea quickly vanished when Sagoonah thus gazed up at her in so candid a manner.

"Yes, my faithful dependant," continued the Queen, "I know that you will rejoice to return to your native land; and the time is not far distant when we shall set off thither. And we shall not go alone, my dear Sagoonah," proceeded Indora, a blush now suffusing the delicate duskiness of her complexion: "I have already given you to understand——"

At this instant the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Christian and Christina, who were advancing along the gravel-walk—for our young hero had been passing the day at the villa. Sagoonah retired: but as she slowly walked back towards the villa, brilliant fires flashed forth from her eyes—and the Burker, as she passed close by the spot where he still lay in ambush, was suddenly seized with amazement—yes, and even with a wild unknown terror as he beheld the lightnings of those burning orbs. Shortly afterwards Queen Indora re-entered the villa in company with Christian and Christina; and then the Burker, stealing forth from the grounds, betook himself slowly towards the main road,—wondering at the strange feelings which had come over him and which had paralysed his arm at the very instant Indora seemed to be in his power.

But notwithstanding the strength of the impression thus made upon the monster at the time, it gradually grew fainter now that the eastern lady was no longer before his view. He began to curse himself for his folly: he thought of the heavy bribe which had been promised him—of the danger which he incurred by remaining in the metropolis—and of the facilities which had been held out for his emigration to Australia or some other part of the world.

"And have I been fool enough," he said to himself, "to lose sight of all them there adwantages just because a petticoat of a rayther better shape than usual, was a flaunting afore my eyes. I tell you what, Barney," he continued, thus apostrophising himself: "it's my opinion as how you're getting to be a cussed fool; and if so be I had my stout stick in my fist, I'd just lay it over your precious back."

Mr. Barnes walked on: the dusk was setting in—the lamps were lighted—there were two continuous lines of illumination stretching towards Oxford Street, far as the eye could reach. All of a sudden the Burker was accosted by some one who asked him the way to a particular street which he named. Barney could scarcely repress a visible start when the voice first sounded in his ear: for the individual who thus accosted him, was none other than old Jonathan Carnabie, the parish-clerk and sexton of Woodbridge.

"Well, yes—I do know the way," replied the Burker, rendering his voice as soft and oily as he possibly could: "but if so be you're a stranger in London, sir, I should advise you to take a cab——"

"The fact is, sir," interrupted Jonathan, "I am walking on principle. It is the first time I was ever in London; and I want to know something about it: therefore I like to find my way on foot—and if I lose it, I inquire it."

"Quite right, sir—quite right!" said the Burker. "But you ought to take care of yourself—I mean of your pockets, you know——"

"And so I do, sir," answered Jonathan Carnabie. "I've read in books and I've also been told that London abounds in queer characters: but I keep my money for the most part at my lodgings, and just come out with as much as I think I may require."

"Quite right, sir!" again said the Burker. "I happen to be going a part of your way——"

"In which case," said the old sexton, "I shall be happy to avail myself of your guidance. Excuse me, sir, but I saw at once that you were a respectable man—or else I should not have taken the liberty to address you."

"Quite right, sir," said the Burker, who now that he had got hold of a particular phrase, harped upon it; for he thought that it had helped to make this favourable impression.

They walked along together. Mr. Barnes was satisfied that his disguise was complete: and from the moment that Jonathan Carnabie had mentioned the money at his lodgings, the Burker experienced an irresistible inclination towards his wonted practices. He saw no reason why he should not fleece the sexton if possible; and moreover he experienced a sort of pride and an inward gloating satisfaction at the thought of being thus able so effectually to deceive the old man in respect to who he really was.

"Have you been long in London, sir?" inquired the Burker, speaking slowly, and measuring his words as much as possible, for fear that he should let out any favourite expression of his own and which might raise Carnabie's suspicions.

"Only a matter of three or four days, sir," responded the sexton. "I presume you live in London, sir?"

"Yes," answered the Burker: "I'm a man of business——"

"Perhaps a lawyer, sir?" said the sexton inquiringly.

"Well, I do a little in the conveyancing line now and then," rejoined the Burker.

"And very profitable too, sir, no doubt?" said the sexton, who was pleased as well as proud of having fallen in with such good company.

"Quite right—quite right, sir!" said Mr. Barnes. "I do manage to get a good livin' by the transfer of property."

"I suppose you attend the Courts, sir—the Law Courts, I mean?" continued Jonathan.

"Not more than I can help," responded the Burker. "That's a atmosphere that don't agree with me."

"Too hot and close, sir?" suggested Mr. Carnabie, who was inclined to be chatty and to make himself agreeable.

"Well, it don't agree with me werry well," rejoined Mr. Barnes: "it always gives me a queer feelin'——But perhaps you'd like to take a drop of summut, sir?" he suddenly interrupted himself, just as he was on the very point of adding that the queer sensation he alluded to very much resembled a crick in the neck.

"I think I'd rather not take anything, sir, till I get to my lodgings," said Jonathan: "but if you would condescend to step in with me and drink a quiet glass of brandy-and-water, I shall feel very proud. My landlord is a superior sort of man——he is a schoolmaster and parish-clerk——Mr. Chubb by name. Perhaps you have heard of him, sir?"

"I've heerd speak of a man named Chubb, which is famous for making locks," answered the Burker; "and I can't abear——"

But here he checked himself again; and the truth was that old Jonathan Carnabie did not take particular notice of the Burker's bad grammar and peculiar phraseology, so pleased and flattered was he at having fallen in with a legal gentleman of such great respectability. And then too, it was the old sexton's first appearance in London: he had been accustomed to the country all his life—and he was inclined to view everything and everybody pertaining to the metropolis in a superior light. The Burker—more and more convinced that the mystery of his disguise was absolutely impenetrable, and resolved to amuse as well as benefit himself at Jonathan Carnabie's expense—began holding forth to him on the beauties and wonders of the metropolis, with the idea of rendering himself as agreeable as possible.

"This here is a werry fine road," said Mr. Barnes; "as straight as a harrow right up to Oxford Street till you come to the corner of the Tottenham Court Road and St. Giles's. You see this here gate on your right hand leading into the Park? Well, it's Tyburn."

"God bless me!" said old Jonathan. "Not where the people used to be hanged?"

"The werry identical same," responded Mr. Barnes. "There's many a fine feller has rode a horse there foaled by a acorn, and danced upon nothink amidst werry great applause. My grandfather——"

"Most likely saw many such sights?" said Mr. Carnabie inquiringly.

"Yes—he was rayther fond of 'em," rejoined the Burker, who had been upon the point of letting out that his respectable ancestor was one of the individuals who had given a terrible notoriety to the district of Tyburn. "Pray, sir, what's your idea of the punishment of death?"

"Why," answered Jonathan, who was imbued with all antiquated prejudices, "I think that when a man has done a great deal of wickedness, he ought to be put out of the world."

"Quite right, sir — quite right!" said the Burker emphatically. "I'd hang 'em all, the scoundrels! I suppose you have come up to London, sir, on a little business?"

"Yes," answered Jonathan; "and I've got all my expenses paid, as well as good lodgings found for me: so that I've got a little opportunity of enjoying myself in a quiet way."

"A country gentleman, I presume, sir?" said the Burker, with as much of an insinuating tone as he could possibly assume.

"Not exactly a gentleman," rejoined old Carnabie, who was a man of truth. "I hope you won't think the worse of me, sir, when I tell you that I'm a parish clerk?"

"Why, if there's a class of men that I cotton to more than all others," exclaimed the Burker as if in admiration, "it's the werry respectable one that you belongs to. I've always found 'em a set of intelligent say-nothink-to-nobody set of chaps; and at this present speaking I've got three cousins and two uncles which is parish-clerks themselves. You should just see how fond the Archbishop of Westminster is of my cousin Tom!"

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mr. Carnabie: "I was not aware that there was an Archbishop of Westminster."

"To be sure!" ejaculated the Burker: "he lives just t'other side of the bridge—a beautiful palace, with the Noted Stout House on one side, and the famous sassage-shop on t'other. I'll see if I can't get my cousin Paul—Tom I mean—to introduce you to his lordship."

Mr. Carnabie was quite confounded at the idea of such an honour: and when he had somewhat recovered from its overpowering effects, he expressed his acknowledgments in suitable terms.

"Oh! I can introduce you to a many fine folks," continued the Burker. "There's the Chief Judge at the Old Bailey, and two or three of the magistrates, which knows me uncommon well. How long, sir, do you think of staying in London?"

"It all depends on circumstances," replied the sexton. "I am not entirely my own master. But excuse me, sir, for not being more confidential on the business that has brought me up to town: it's quite of a private nature——"

"Pray don't make any apology, sir," interrupted Barney. "You're quite right to keep your own counsel. What did you say your name was, sir?"

"My name is Jonathan Carnabie, at your service, sir," responded the old sexton.

"And mine, sir, is Mr. John Smith," rejoined the Burker. "I don't happen to have a bit of paste-board about me at the moment: but I shall be werry happy to see you to dine with me to-morrow at my house, Number 347, Grosvenor Square. No ceremony, you know. Just a bit of fish, a plain jint, a tart, and summut of that sort—with maybe a bottle of wine or so."

Again was Mr. Carnabie confounded by the honours and favours thus showered upon him: and again were his acknowledgments duly expressed. He and his companion walked on together, until at length they reached the commencement of the street in which Mr. and Mrs. Chubb resided, and which the sexton now recognised as the locality to which he had sought to be directed.

"I tell you what," said the Burker, "let you and me be alone together over this glass of brandy-and-water that we're going to have at your place: cos why, don't you see, I don't know nothink of your landlord—and it won't do for a man like me to demean his-self to associate with everybody."

"But Mr. Chubb is a parish clerk!" exclaimed Jonathan; "and I thought you just now said——"

"All right, my good friend!" interrupted the Burker: "I don't fly from my word. Parish clerks is the best fellers in existence: but I happen to know summut of this man Chubb, now that I come into this street and recollect where he lives."

"Why, is he not a respectable person?" inquired Mr. Carnabie in astonishment. "Those who recommended me to his lodgings—or who indeed took them for me, I should rather say——"

"Well, well," said the Burker, "he's respectable enough as far as the world goes. But betwixt you and me and the post," added Mr. Barnes, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, "there isn't a burial that takes place in Chubb's churchyard that he don't make ten or twelve guineas more out of it than he had ought to do. You understand me—a nod is as good as a wink—and Chubb is hand and glove with the surgeons."

"God bless me!" ejaculated old Jonathan, stopping suddenly short: "do you mean to say that he is in league with the resurrectionists?"

"Nothink more nor less," answered the Burker. "But keep your own counsel. It isn't for me to make mischief: I only tell you this to show why I don't choose exactly to put my feet under the same mahogany with this feller Chubb."

Old Jonathan Carnabie gave a deep groan of horror: but the Burker hastened to speak a few reassuring words; and they continued their way to the front door of Mr. Chubb's residence.

CHAPTER CVIII.

CONTINUATION OF THE BURKER'S ADVENTURES.

THAT door was opened by the slipshod servant-girl who was maid-of-all-work in the establishment; and Jonathan Carnabie led the way to the little parlour which he occupied and which was the very same that Christian Ashton tenanted at the time he was private secretary to that illustrious potentate, the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Barney the Burker followed his new acquaintance into the parlour: the girl was ordered to bring up glasses and hot water: the brandy was produced; and after having imbibed the contents of the first tumbler, Jonathan Carnabie found his spirits expanding after the damp thrown upon them by the terrible aspersion flung against the character of his landlord Mr. Chubb.

"You're werry comfortable here—werry comfortable indeed," said the Burker, looking around him.

"Yes," answered Jonathan, "there is nothing to complain of in respect to the lodgings. I've got a nice little bed-room exactly overhead."

"And I hope you lock your door at night," said the Burker, in a low voice. "Not that I mean to say the people of the house would do anythink wrong: but London is a queer place, and thieves is like ghostesses—they insinivates theirselves here, there, and everywhere."

"Thank you for the hint," said old Jonathan, refilling his tumbler. "I myself have had a little bit of expereience in respect to the consummate vill-ny of a London scoundrel. Did you ever hear of a man called Barney the Burker?"

"I can't say that I have," responded the individual himself, speaking in a slow and measured tone, as if he were racking his memory upon the point. "Who is he?"

"A murderer—and everything that is bad," replied Jonathan. "He came down into the country—I took him as an assistant—the ungrateful wretch was very near murdering me—but assistance came at the very nick of time—the villain fled precipitately, and plunged into the river. It was thought that he was drowned: but only a few days ago he turned up somewhere in London—— Surely you must have heard, Mr. Smith, of a house that was entered by the police, and where on digging up the cellar or some underground place, evidences were discovered of barbarous murders having been committed?"

"To be sure! Now you mention it," said the Burker, "I do know summut about it. It was in the papers—wasn't it?"

"Yes," replied Jonathan; "and heavy rewards were offered for the discovery of the wretches. I hope they will be found."

"I hope they will," added the Burker, as he coolly set about compounding his third tumbler of punch. "Well, all them things, Mr. Carnabie," he continued, "shows how careful you ought to be in locking your door of nights and stowing away your cash in a place of safety. I tell you what I do: I always have a matter of five or six hundred guineas in my house; and I poke it all up the chimley in my bed-room. That's betwixt you and me: but no one would think of looking up a chimley in search of money."

"I content myself," answered Jonathan, "with locking up the little I have got in my box. It isn't much—but still it's too much to lose."

"Quite right! quite right!" said the Burker: "never throw away a chance."

In this manner they continued to discourse for some little while longer—until old Jonathan Carnabie began to feel the effects of the hot brandy-and-water which he was drinking. Then the Burker suggested something about the propriety of a little bit of supper—adding "that he was always accustomed to take a mouthful at nine o'clock in the evening, at his mansion, No. 347, Grosvenor Square,—where he should be happy to see his friend Mr. Carnabie to dinner at five o'clock on the morrow."

The old Sexton, in spite of the penuriousness of his habits, thought that he could not possibly do otherwise than give the best possible entertainment to so liberal, generous, and hospitable a friend; and as he himself had dined at two o'clock, he had no disinclination for a supper. He therefore suggested a rump-steak, and was preparing to ring the bell to order the same,—when the Burker caught him by the arm, saying, "Stop, my good friend! don't trust that dirty drab of a servant to go out and buy anythink for you. There's nothink like a lobster for supper; and it just happens that my own fishmonger lives close by. No offence—but I'll go myself and send in the finest he's got."

Jonathan vowed that he would pay for the lobster: but Mr. Barnes would not think of such a thing; and he issued forth accordingly. Proceeding to the nearest fishmonger's he purchased a very fine lobster, which he ordered to be sent to Mr. Chubb's; and on his way back, the Burker just dropped into a chemist's shop, where he procured a small phial of a certain liquid drug which he pretended to be under the necessity of taking. He then returned to Mr. Chubb's abode, and rejoined his friend Mr. Jonathan Carnabie.

The lobster was served up; and the old sexton relished it all the more that he had not been compelled to pay for it. Another jug of hot water was brought up: the tumblers were refilled; and the Burker seized the opportunity to pour a few drops from his phial into Jonathan Carnabie's glass. Five minutes afterwards the old sexton was lying back in his arm-chair in a state of complete stupefaction.

The Burker rose from his own seat—took a candle in his hand—and crept softly up the stairs to the bed-room overhead. To force open the box was the work of a few moments; and at the bottom of all the clothes the villain discovered about thirty sovereigns in a worsted stocking.

"Well, the game was worth playing for," he said to himself, as he secured the coins about his person: and then he cautiously crept down the stairs again.

At that very instant there was a loud double knock at the front door: the Burker, hastily puffing out the candle, deposited it in a corner; and the next instant he himself opened the door. A tall gentleman in a cloak was standing on the steps; and Barney at once recognised the person who had so suddenly interfered to prevent his murderous design on old Jonathan Carnabie at Woodbridge. But not for an instant did the Burker lose his presence of mind: he issued forth; and the next moment the servant-girl appeared to answer the inquiry of Mr. Redcliffe—for he, as the reader has doubtless understood, was the tall gentleman in the cloak. We must add that not for an instant had Mr. Redcliffe suspected that the individal who had just passed him was the miscreant Burker.

We must follow the footsteps of the last-mentioned person. On turning the nearest corner, he quickened his pace—he sped into Oxford Street—and entering a cab, ordered the driver to take him to Whitechapel Church. On arriving there the Burker dismissed the cab, walked along for a few minutes, and entering a public-house, sate down to reflect upon the course which he should now pursue. He somewhat repented the trick he had played old Jonathan Carnabie. Not that he regretted having obtained possession of the thirty sovereigns—very far from it: but he feared there would be a hue and cry—and whether or not it was suspected that it was veritably the Burker who had committed the robbery, an accurate description of his present personal appearance would be sure to obtain publicity. He must therefore change his disguise altogether; and it was on this subject he was now deliberating within himself.

It was a small public-house, in an obscure street leading out of Whitechapel, which Barney had thus entered. There was only one other person in the little parlour at the time; and this individual speedily rose and took his departure. A few minutes afterwards the door opened; and another person entered. He wore a low-crowned hat with very broad brims—beneath which appeared masses of red hair; and he had large whiskers, of a corresponding hue. He wore a pair of those green spectacles which have side-glasses, and are denominated shades. A loose brown paletot, or overcoat, was buttoned up to the throat, which was encircled by a thick shawl-neckerchief. The over-coat, as well as the grey pantaloons, were a little the worse for wear; and it was difficult at a first glance to judge what the social position or the avocation of the individual might be. The waiter followed him into the room with a glass of hot gin-and-water: the green-spectacled stranger threw down a sovereign and received the change. Before the waiter left the parlour, the Burker ordered his own glass to be refilled; and in the meanwhile, he was furtively surveying the individual who had just entered. The latter was doing precisely the same thing in respect to the Burker; and though the eyes of both were shaded by spectacles, yet each appeared to have the intuitive suspicion that he was the object of these stealthy regards on the part of the other.

The waiter brought in the fresh supply of spirits-and-water which the Burker had ordered; and when he had retired, the two occupants of the parlour surveyed each other again in the same stealthy manner as before. At length the Burker suddenly burst into a loud laugh; and dashing his hand upon the table, exclaimed, "By jingo, Jack, it's excellent! The only thing is, it's *too* good!"

Jack Smedley—for he was the disguised individual who had so recently entered—started up from his seat in direst alarm at that sudden guffaw on the Burker's part: but quickly recognising his friend's voice, he was relieved of a world of terror.

"You don't mean to say this is *you*, Barney?" exclaimed Jack as they shook hands.

"Hush, you fool! No mentioning of names!" growled the Burker, savagely. "But I tell you that you've done the thing too strong: that red wig of your'n," he continued, in a low voice, "isn't nat'ral: them false whiskers is too bushy;

and then you've got the wery identical broad-brimmed tile you was always used to wear. What do you think of this for a masquerading costume?"—and the Burker glanced complacently over his own person.

"I never should have known you," answered Jack. "But I say, don't you think the people of the house will think it odd that two such queer-looking chaps—both with spectacles on—should meet in their parlour?"

"Where are you living, Jack?" inquired Barney, hastily.

"Pretty close by," was the response. "I've got a bit of a lodging, and three or four sorts of disguises——"

"The very ticket!" said the Burker. "Tell us where it is. Then you go off first—I'll foller in a few minutes—and we'll have a chat about our affairs."

This arrangement was carried into effect; and in something less than half-an-hour the Burker and Jack Smedley were seated together in a small poorly-furnished back room, belonging to a house in one of the obscure narrow streets leading out of the Commercial Road.

"And so you haven't heard anythink about Bab?" said the Burker, thus resuming the thread of a conversation which was temporarily interrupted by the process of mixing some spirits-and-water, the materials for which Jack Smedley had just placed upon the table.

"Nothing of her," answered the last-named individual. "I suppose you know how I gave the detectives the slip at the station the other day; and ever since I've been playing at hide-and-seek with them."

"You don't mean to say they're on your track?" demanded the Burker.

"I hope not," responded Jack Smedley, shuddering violently at the bare idea. "But what is it otherwise than playing at hide-and-seek when one is obliged to go about in all sorts of disguises? I'm sure I don't how it is to end: I'm uncommon tired of this kind of life: but I don't dare leave London—I think it's the safest place after all when one's in trouble."

"No doubt of it!" remarked the Burker. "But the people of this house?"

"Oh! they're all right enough—or at least I hope so," rejoined Jack Smedley. "I pass as Mr. Wilkins here; and they think I'm a begging-letter impostor or something of that sort. You may very well suppose that I have not taken the trouble to undeceive them."

"I should rayther think not," replied the Burker. "As for myself, I've just been doing a a little bit of business which renders it necessary that I should turn myself inside out and put on a new disguise."

"Well," responded Jack Smedley, "there is choice enough here for you:" and opening a box he displayed several disguises of different kinds, and each being as unlike all the rest as possible. "But where have you been living in London?"

"I haven't been living nowhere," rejoined the Burker: "I only come up to town this morning—and I don't think my name has yet figured in the Fashionable Arrivals."

"And that disguise—that dye for your face——".

"Oh! it's too long to tell how I come by it," interrupted the Burker, "I've got some business in hand that will keep me in London for a day or two—perhaps more; and therefore I shall just take the liberty of borrowing one of these here disguises. What the deuce is this?—a Jews gaberdine and a great grey beard——"

"Yes—wig and all complete," exclaimed Jack Smedley. "It's the only dress I have not as yet worn. But hadn't you better stay and sleep here in my place to-night——"

"It won't do, Jack, for two such fellers as you and me to be too much together," interrupted the Burker. "I shall leave you presently: but we can make an appointment somewhere for to-morrow night—and in the meantime I'll just borrow this dress of your's."

Thus speaking, the Burker proceeded to examine the gaberdine, the wig, and the beard; and he thought to himself that it would be the very best disguise he could possibly assume.

"Where did you buy this!" he asked, thinking it prudent to ascertain something of that particular disguise's antecedents if he could succeed in obtaining such information.

"I bought the whole kit which you've got in your hand, at a shop in Rosemary Lane," replied Jack Smedley.

The Burker proceeded to put off his own disguise, and he likewise washed the chemical dye from his hands and face. Then, by means of a thick fluid gum which Smedley furnished him, he fastened on the grey beard, which covered all the lower part of his face, and which with its associated moustache concealed the mal-formation of his lip. He put on the grey wig which formed part of the costume: he hesitated as to resuming the spectacles—but he at length decided on discarding them. The gaberdine was one of those long, black, loose, straight-cut upper garments worn by some of those old-fashioned Jews who sell pastiles, soap, or rhubarb in the streets; and when the Burker had put it on, Jack Smedley expressed his approval of the completeness of the disguise. A low hat, with very large brims, crowned the Burker's head; and as he gave one of his coarse laughs, he expressed a wish that he had a small wooden tray and a few pastiles, that he might play his new part to perfection.

"And now, Jack, I'm off," he added. "You've lent me a good disguise—and you've got some of my toggery in return. If it was a little colder, I shouldn't have given you up that handsome black coat of mine. But how about to-morrow night? Where shall we meet?"

After a few minutes' deliberation, a place was named; and the Burker sallied forth. Returning into Whitechapel, he pursued his way towards Aldgate,—in the vicinage of which he was acquainted with a public-house where he knew he could obtain a bed for the night without any questions being asked. But all of a sudden he stopped short; and a deep but terrible imprecation burst from his lips. He had left all his money behind him in the breast-pocket of the coat which he had taken off at Jack Smedley's lodging. Yes—all the money he had received from the Duke of Marchmont, and all of which he had so recently plundered Jonathan Carnabie, had been thus left behind! In his breeches-pocket he had but three or four shillings and a few halfpence.

"I don't think Jack would rob a pal," said the Burker to himself, as he began hastily to retrace his way towards the lodging-house: and yet the miscreant had terrible misgivings in his mind.

The long gaberdine getting about his legs, encumbered him in his walk, which now almost amounted to a run; and he kept on muttering imprecations against the Jewish costume in which he had disguised himself. He reached the lodging-house: he knocked at the door—the summons was attended to by an old woman, who was the mistress of the place; and she exclaimed angrily, "What do you mean by coming back again to disturb us between eleven and twelve at night?"

"No offence, my good woman," answered the Burker: "but I just want to say a word to my friend—what's his name again?—Oh! Mr. Vilkins!"

"Then it's no use your coming here," replied the woman: "for Wilkins has gone, bag and baggage."

"Gone?" vociferated the Burker. "It's a lie—and I will see him! So stand aside——"

"Who says it's a lie?" demanded an old man—the woman's husband—popping forth his head, which had a white cotton night-cap on, from a side-door in the passage. "You hadn't left the house a minute before Mr. Wilkins went and fetched a cab, and took himself off with his traps, paying us a week's rent instead of giving us a week's warning. Now you've got your answer; and so be off with you, or I'll call the police."

At that very instant the Burker beheld a constable appear within the rays of the lamp at the corner of the street; and with another lowly muttered but terrific imprecation, he hastened away. When beyond view of the policeman, the Burker paused to reflect upon the course which he should now pursue. That Jack Smedley had really robbed him, was only too evident; and instead of being in possession of a considerable sum of money, Barney was almost penniless. He not merely longed to get back his gold, but likewise to wreak a terrific vengeance on Jack Smedley. Suddenly a thought struck him. He advanced to the nearest cab-stand—drew the waterman aside—and putting a shilling into his hand, asked him whether such-and-such a person (describing Smedley according to his disguise) had fetched a vehicle from the rank within the last half hour? The waterman replied in the affirmative; and he furthermore named the house to which the cab had gone to take up the individual's luggage. This was the house where Smedley had lodged; and therefore the waterman's tale was evidently correct. But the waterman was totally unable to afford a clue to the direction in which the cab had subsequently driven.

"But if so be you particularly want to know," added this functionary, "you've only to wait till the cabman comes back—and then you can learn all about it."

The Burker decided upon adopting the hint thus given; and he entered an adjacent public-house, where the waterman promised to rejoin him immediately upon the return of the particular cabman whose presence was now required. The Burker, in a mood of savage sullenness, meditated the most desperate vengeance if he should only succeed in tracking out his false friend. Thus nearly an hour passed: Barney was growing desperately impatient: but at length the waterman made his appearance, accompanied by the cabman, who had only just returned to his rank.

The Burker now ascertained that Jack Smedley had been driven in the cab to a street at the back of St. Luke's Hospital in the Old Street Road—that he had alighted there, and had taken his luggage into a house the inmates of which were in bed at the time of his arrival, but had got up in obedience to his summons, and had given him admission with much apparent willingness. The Burker was compelled to give the cabman a shilling for this information; and then with his remaining coin he retained the man's services to take him up as far as St. Luke's Hospital. The church in Old Street proclaimed the hour of one just as the Burker alighted from the cab. He now pursued his way on foot; and in a few minutes reached the house which the cabman had accurately described to him. The Burker was totally ignorant of who the occupants of the dwelling might be: but he felt tolerably well assured that they could not be what is termed respectable—or else under existing circumstances they would be no friends of Jack Smedley, supposing them to be acquainted with him: while on the other hand, if he were unknown to them, they would scarcely have admitted a stranger at such an hour. But that seeming willingness on their part, to which the cabman had alluded, to afford Smedley a lodging, warranted the conclusion that they at least knew something of him.

The Burker's mind was soon made up how to act. He rang at the bell—for knocker there was none; and in a few minutes he heard footsteps approaching along the passage inside. An elderly man—with a candle in his hand, and only half dressed—appeared at the door; and very much astonished did he look at the singular aspect of the Burker, with the beard and gaberdine.

"One word with you, my friend," said Barney in a low but peremptory tone: and he at once entered the passage.

"What does this mean?" demanded the man, affecting a look of indignation, though in reality he had a visible trouble depicted on his countenance.

A glance showed the Burker that the key was in the street-door: he at once locked it—and taking out the key, said to the man, "You don't know me—eh?"

"No," was the response, nervously and tremblingly given.

"Then I'm a detective—that's what I am. You needn't stare at me after that fashion: it's a dress I've wore to look out for a chap that's wanted—and I've found him at last. I don't mean *you*—so you needn't look so glum: though if you've any of your nonsense or cause any obstruction, as the saying is, I shall precious soon walk you off. I've got half-a-dozen of my people in the street."

At this moment a woman, about a year or two younger than the man—both of whom were elderly—emerged from an adjoining room, with terror depicted upon her countenance: for she had evidently overheard all that the Burker had just been saying.

"I hope there's nothing wrong, sir," she began, in a voice of whimpering entreaty. "Me and my husband keeps a respectable lodging-house—and though poor——"

"Well, I've no quarrel with you," interrupted the Burker: "but just show me the way to the room where you've lodged the person which arrived here just now in a cab."

The looks which the man and his wife exchanged, convinced the Burker that he was on the right track—that Smedley was there—and that they moreover knew who he was.

"Come now, no nonsense!" he said: "but be quick—or it will be all the wuss for you, I can promise!"

"Up-stairs—the back attic," said the man: and he presented the candle to the Burker.

"Now, I'm going to manage this little business without no noise," remarked the villain; "and so if you both hold your tongues, you'll find it the best way to keep out of trouble."

"I'm sure we're very much obleeged to you, sir," said the woman: "and if so be you'll take a drop of something to drink——"

"Presently," interrupted the Burker. "There! go into your own room—keep quiet—and leave me to manage. Do you think he can hear what we are saying?"

"I'm sure he can't," responded the man,—"unless he's come half-way down stairs for the purpose—which isn't likely. He wouldn't think anything particular of the door bell ringing, because he knows what sort of a house it is."

The Burker now waved his hand for the elderly couple to retire into their room,—which they accordingly did,—both firmly convinced that their visitor was a detective in disguise. Barney, with the light in his hand, began ascending the stairs; and in a few moments he gained the top landing. Then, as he opened the door of the back attic, Smedley started up in his bed from a sound sleep,—giving vent to an ejaculation of terror on recognising the disguised Burker.

"Hold your tongue, you scoundrel!" growled Barney, as he entered the room and closed the door. "You sneaking, white-livered rascal!" he continued, in a voice which though low, was full of a deep savage concentrated rage; "did you think as how you could play your cursed pranks upon me?"

Jack Smedley was as ghastly as a ghost; while, as he sate up in bed, his hair was literally standing on end and his whole frame was quivering. He endeavoured to speak—but could not: he was a prey to all the terrific and horrifying dread which the appearance of so desperate a man as the Burker was under such circumstances but too well calculated to inspire.

"Now mark me, Jack Smedley," resumed the terrible Barney: "if I don't find every coin of my money safe among your traps, I'll have your life though I swing for it to-morrow morning!"

"It is all there," gasped forth the miserable gold-beater, whose cowardice was only equalled by the wickedness of his disposition. "But pray don't hurt me—pray don't!"

"Hurt you?" echoed Barney: and he ground his teeth with ferocious rage. "I did swear to myself just now that I would have your life: but if so be I get back my blunt, I'll leave you for the hangman. There never was such a dirty, sneaking, paltry scoundrel as you are in this blessed world! Why, your wife Bab was always ashamed of you—always!—and I'm blowed if I think Jack Ketch himself would like to have to do with such a fellow!"

Smedley began to whimper and snivel; while the Burker, deliberately drawing forth his dreadful-looking clasp-knife, proceeded to cut the chords of the box which was in the attic. He opened it: he found all his money safe; and his eyes glistened with a savage joy as he resumed possession of his gold. He continued to ransack all the contents of the box: but he found therein nothing else worth taking.

"Where's your own money?" he demanded of Smedley. "Here, I suppose!" and he caught up the pantaloons which the gold-beater had been wearing, and which were lying over a chair.

There were six or seven sovereigns and a quantity of silver in the pocket: but Jack Smedley, now having the horrors of utter destitution before his eyes, began to moan so piteously that the Burker thought to himself, "He will do something desperate if I leave him penniless; and maybe he will blow the whole thing, turn round and peach, and make a general smash of it. I'll play the generous towards him."

The Burker placed upon the table the money which he had just taken from the pocket of the pantaloons,—saying at the same time, "Leave off that precious moaning and whining—can't you, you fool! Or do you want me to slit your wind-pipe for you? Now look here, Jack—you're a thundering rascal, and you know you are: it would sarve you right to leave you without a scurrick, as you meant to leave me. But I'll just give you another chance: so I'll content myself with taking back my own. And now good-bye."

With these words, the Burker turned and quitted the attic,—while Jack Smedley felt so marvellously relieved by his disappearance, that the loss of the money he had meant to self-appropriate was now but a very secondary consideration. The Burker descended the stairs: the man and woman of the house issued forth from their room, wondering to hear only the footsteps of a single individual—for they had naturally expected that the supposed detective had come to take Jack Smedley into custody. The Burker did not however choose to volunteer any explanation: he ordered them both to go back into their own room and not bother him with their presence: and then opening the front door, he quitted the house.

CHAPTER CIX.

THE AYAH AND MR. REDCLIFFE.

It was in the afternoon of the day following that night's incidents which we have been relating; and Mr. Redcliffe proceeded to Queen Indora's villa. Having passed a couple of hours in her society, he took his leave: but as he was issuing from the front-door, Sagoonah, who opened it for him, suddenly laid her hand upon his arm, and said in a low deep voice, "It is absolutely necessary I should have a few minutes' conversation with you."

Redcliffe stopped short in astonishment. For an instant the eyes of the Hindoo woman had shed upon him their burning light in that same manner which on three or four previous occasions had struck him as being so peculiar: but now, the next instant, her looks became full of a soft and earnest entreaty.

"What mean you, Sagoonah?" he asked: "what can you have to say to me which may not be said in the presence of your mistress? Your request is so strange——"

"I beseech and implore that you will grant me a few minutes!" responded the ayah. "Oh! pray, pray do! Yonder—in the field at the extremity of the garden—I will be there in a few minutes! Oh, Mr. Redcliffe, refuse me not!"

She then hastily glided away; and Mr. Redcliffe, issuing from the villa, deliberated bewilderingly with himself as to the course which he ought to pursue. The haunting looks of Sagoonah appeared to corroborate the idea that she had really something of importance to say to him; and he could at least see no harm in hearing what this might be. He accordingly decided upon keeping the appointment which she had just given him: and on quitting the grounds attached to the villa, he repaired to the field which was completely concealed by a screen of trees from the windows of Queen Indora's habitation. In a few minutes he beheld the white dress of Sagoonah at a short distance: at first she approached rapidly; but when within a few yards of him, she relaxed her pace and seemed to be smitten with confusion and timidity.

"What have you to fear, Sagoonah?" asked Mr. Redcliffe: "why is your manner thus strange? Draw near, and tell me for what purpose you besought this interview, and what important communication you may have to make to me?"

"I know not, sir," responded Sagoonah, in a low soft tremulous voice, "whether to sink down at your feet and speak as a slave—or whether to look you in the face and with the dignity of a woman address you."

"These are strange words," said Mr. Redcliffe, gazing intently upon the ayah in the hope of fathoming her purpose by the expression of her countenance. "You speak of slavery: there is none in this country—at least not that species of slavery that you are thinking of. Even if there were, I should not claim such homage from you——"

"Ah! but, sir," interrupted Sagoonah, "if there be no slavery that is enacted or confirmed by law, there may nevertheless be a slavery in which the feelings or the passions enthrall the individual!"

"What mean you, Sagoonah?" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe, who now appeared to catch a slight scintillation of the real truth: but the next instant he repudiated the suspicion from his mind as something preposterous or impossible. "What mean you?" he repeated.

The ayah advanced a little nearer towards him: there was a moment's flashing of her brilliant burning eyes; and then the next instant they were curtained by her ebon lashes, and her looks were downcast. For a moment too it appeared as if she were really about to assert that womanly dignity of which she had spoken; but that as if she found it impossible to be maintained against the influence of other and softer feelings which were agitating within her.

"Mr. Redcliffe," she said, in a voice that was again tremulous, "I would fain consult you upon a point which closely and intimately concerns my happiness."

"But why not consult your kind-hearted mistress?" inquired Mr. Redcliffe. "She, Sagoonah, is the most fitting person to be made your confidante, and to proffer you such counsel as may be necessary under the circumstances."

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Sagoonah: "my mistress is the very last person whom I can consult!"

"And it is equally impossible that you can consult me," said Mr. Redcliffe coldly: for the varying confusion, hesitation, and embarrassment of the ayah—a moment's dignity being succeeded by minutes of tremulous bashfulness, and by a visible diffidence in coming to the point,—all these served to strengthen the suspicion which had previously entered the mind of Mr. Redcliffe.

"I am a stranger in a strange country," continued Sagoonah, now throwing a deep pathos into her tone; "and yet you refuse to become my counsellor—my adviser! Ah, sir! if this be the harbinger of that extreme cruelty which I am to experience at your hands when the revelation of my secret shall be fully made——"

"Listen to me, Sagoonah!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe: and though he now spoke peremptorily, yet it was likewise with a certain degree of kindness: for he felt that after all his suspicion might be wrong; and being utterly without vanity or self-conceit, he could scarcely fancy it was correct. "It is not seemly for us to continue in conversation here: both your character and mine would suffer if we were observed. I do not mean to address you in harsh terms: but you are now at once to understand from my lips that without farther hesitation on your part must you proceed to the communication you have to make to me—— Unless indeed, Sagoonah, you would rather that we should separate at once, and that we should both forget the occurrence of this private interview."

"Forget?" ejaculated Sagoonah, almost in accents of bitter scorn—not at Mr. Redcliffe himself, but at the idea as she had caught it up. "Forget? No—it is impossible! Never can I forget aught that is connected with you! And now you have my secret," she exclaimed, for a moment flinging her burning regards upon him: then, as the next instant they were again curtained by their dark fringes, she added in a low voice, "I love you!"

Mr. Redcliffe first felt inclined to give vent to expressions of anger and indignation; and this he would assuredly have done if dealing with an English woman who sought to set herself up as a rival to Queen Indora and tempt or beguile him away from that plight which he had made her and from that troth by which he now considered himself so solemnly bound. But a second thought made him reflect that it was a Hindoo woman who stood before him—one who belonged to a distant and different clime—whose thoughts and whose notions were as distinct as the habits and customs of that clime itself from those of Western Europe. Instead therefore of displaying anger or scorn, Mr. Redcliffe considered it alike more prudent and more generous to reason with Sagoonah.

"I will not pretend," he said, "to doubt the seriousness with which you have made that avowal, inasmuch as I cannot for a moment suppose that you would stoop to such miserable trifling. But it is impossible, Sagoonah, that you can entertain the slightest hope——"

"Hope, sir?" she murmured. "Love itself is hope! Of one thing I am certain:—you love not Queen Indora, although you have promised to espouse her! Then wherefore may I not hope that you will yet learn to love *me?*"

"If I were to tell you, Sagoonah," replied Mr, Redcliffe, with a deep mournfulness in his tone and a profound compassion in his looks, "that the power of love is dead within me, you perhaps would not understand my meaning. But let me address you on another subject. What is your age? You are in your twenty-sixth year—with all the vigour of youthfulness—still young——and I do not mean to compliment you when I say that you are beautiful. I am three or four years past forty: but through care and grief my appearance is that of a still older man. Whatsoever personal beauty I may have once possessed, is gone——"

"You forget, sir," interrupted Sagoonah gently, "that I have known you for many years——yes, from my very girlhood have I known you! Was I not from a child brought up in the palace of Inderabad?—and think you not, therefore, my memory retains your image as I first knew you?—so that even while I now look upon you, I fail to observe whatsoever ravages time or other circumstances may have wrought upon you. You were the first European whom I ever beheld; and therefore from my very girlhood was there all the interest of novelty in my mind;—and is it surprising that such interest should have expanded and ripened into another feeling? Oh, sir!" continued Sagoonah enthusiastically, "my brain is stored with memories in respect to yourself!—memories which I have cherished and which I have fed upon as the most delicious of food! Ah, imagination transports me back to the spacious halls and marble courts of Inderabad. I see myself a girl of fifteen or sixteen, seated by the side of a fountain—and you approach—you speak kindly to me—you tell me of the far-off land from which you came—this land where I now find myself, and which at the time I so little dreamt I should ever visit! And I see you walking as it were in all the pride and glory of your own civilisation, amidst the comparative barbarism of that native clime of mine! I hear those around me speaking of wise and liberal measures ordained by the King: I hear your name mentioned with admiration—for full well is it known that from the suggestions of your wisdom do those measures emanate! Oh, I am a young girl again—I am roving through the gardens and the marble courts of Inderabad: I already love you—my admiring looks follow you, though you perceive them not: I look up to you as a superior being that has come down amidst the immeasurable inferiority of that people to whom I belong!"

It was with a strange and wild exaltation that Sagoonah spoke—an exaltation fervid, glowing, and rapturous; and if Mr. Redcliffe had eyes and a heart to be smitten with the grand spectacle of that Hindoo woman's darkly splendid beauty, he could not have failed to be stricken *then*! The supernal lustre of her eyes shed a halo of animation upon her countenance: her supple, willowy form yielded in eloquent gestures and graceful attitudes to the varying tenour of her discourse: the quick heavings of her bosom gave visible undulations to the snow-white drapery which covered it: while her arms, bare to the shoulders—so admirably modelled though of dusky skin—played their part with a grace all natural and unstudied in those gesticulations which gave such force to her language, half pathetic, half passionate.

"Sagoonah," said Mr. Redcliffe, "I ought not to have tarried to listen to such discourse as this; and if you were an Englishwoman, our interview would have been cut short almost at the instant it commenced——or perhaps, I should rather say that it would not have been granted at all! But once more I conjure you to listen to me attentively. Either you mean that I am to prove faithless to the vow I have plighted to your mistress, and receive yourself as a wife?—or else you intend me to remain faithful to that plight in some sense, but to abandon myself to the temptation of an illicit love with you? In either case you are acting most improperly: you are outraging the loftiness of that very female dignity of which you ere now spoke: you are behaving ungratefully to the mistress who has ever been so kind and indulgent towards you. Do you not comprehend me, Sagoonah? Will you not promise that you will stifle this infatuation which you have been cherishing, and that never more henceforth will you address me in such terms? You see that I do not reproach you: I speak kindly to you——and surely, surely your better feelings must be touched—your good sense must make you aware of the truth of all I am telling you?"

"If you possess an enchanter's power," responded Sagoonah, "give me back my freedom of the heart—release me from the spells with which you have enthralled me—pluck out from my brain all the memories of the past—tear away from my soul that image which has become as it were interwoven with my own existence! If you can do all this, Mr. Redcliffe, *then* indeed may we separate at once, and I may faithfully promise never more to address you in the language which I have been holding! Oh, think not that I am unaware of the desperate—the well nigh hopeless condition in which I am placed with regard to you! But my feelings are stronger than myself; and I have no more power to crush this love of mine than you have to bid it be crushed. Is it not therefore vain to talk to me of duties and proprieties? is it not useless to remind me of the kind indulgence of a good mistress—aye, and all the more so," she added, in a voice which suddenly became low, and which had a deeper meaning in it than Mr. Redcliffe could fathom at the time,—"aye, and all the more so inasmuch as I feel that I have sinned against her too deeply to leave room for repentance!"

"But, Sagoonah," said Mr. Redcliffe, now adopting a sterner look and a more peremptory tone, "it is absolutely necessary that you should exercise a becoming control over your feelings. I do not love you—I cannot love you! Whatsoever influence you may hope, think, or seek to exercise over me, would only be a tyranny against which I should rebel; and I do not wish to speak too harshly—but still I must add that if it went too far I should punish it! Your good sense must tell you that were I to breathe in the ear of your mistress a single syllable of all that has now taken place, she would not retain you in her service. Be reasonable therefore——"

"Be reasonable?" echoed Sagoonah, her eyes flashing fire, and her entire form writhing as if with the sense of an insult. "Who are you that bid the flames which you have excited suddenly quench themselves? Can you command the volcano to cease its heavings and be still? How then think you that you can exercise such a power over the human heart? No, Clement Redcliffe! it is you who are most unreasonable. I am but a poor weak woman—you are a strong man; and it is *you* who are playing the tyrant towards *me*! You ere now asked me what my purpose was and what my hope is? Listen——No, do not interrupt me! I insist upon speaking in my turn—and it is my turn now! Since I left Inderabad, I have learned much of the world—I have looked upon it in a new light—I have studied it—I know it. Well aware am I of the immeasurable distance which exists between myself and you—of the great gulf which social distinctions have established between us. Think not, therefore, that I seek to become your wife! No—but I will become your slave; and to be your slave, is to be your mistress—the toy with whom you may play—the object that may gratify a passing phantasy. But you must renounce the vow which you have pledged to Indora——"

"Sagoonah!" ejaculated Mr. Redcliffe angrily.

"Listen—listen!" cried the Hindoo woman vehemently: and she stamped her foot with excitement. "You shall hear me to the end! I was saying, therefore, that you must renounce your vow to become the husband of Indora. A diadem awaits her:—surely, surely she can leave to her humble slave the happiness of the heart's love? And, Oh! think not, Mr. Redcliffe, that if you really loved Indora, I would insist upon such a sacrifice as this! No: I should have mercy upon you—because, alas! I know what it is to love. It is really no sacrifice that I am demanding on your part. You seek not for worldly honours nor earthly titles: you care not for that Sovereign dignity with which the sharer of Queen Indora's throne would become invested. Ah! you see that I comprehend your disposition well. Then, after all, what is it that I ask? That you will not marry where you do not love—but that you consent to receive a slave and a mistress where you are beloved!"

"And all this, Sagoonah, is an impossibility," said Mr. Redcliffe. "I have endeavoured to reason with you—and you will not be reasonable. You now compel me to speak out the full truth sternly—and you may think implacably. Nevertheless, it must be done. Return you to your mistress: for here our interview ends. I shall call at the villa to-morrow; and by your demeanour shall I be decided whether I retain the seal of silence on my lips—or whether I must perform a duty by explaining to Queen Indora everything that has taken place. Do not regard me as an enemy, Sagoonah: I would rather be your friend! I have made all possible allowances for you——"

"No, sir—you have *not!*" interrupted Sagoonah vehemently. "The poor Hindoo woman has her feelings as well as the haughtiest lady of your civilized British land. Mine are wounded. Think you that I have no virtue? think you that I value not my chastity and my honour? The former is immaculate—the latter untarnished. Yet do I offer to sacrifice my virtue for your sake. Judge thereby the strength of my love! And is such a love as this to be subdued by a cold mandate to [illegible] reasonable? is it something to be crushed like this?"—and setting her foot upon a wild flower, she trampled it down, half disdainfully, half vehemently.

"Sagoonah, I must leave you," said Mr. Redcliffe: and he was turning away.

"No—our interview ends not thus!" interrupted Sagoonah: and bounding forward, she caught him by the arm. "You know not what it is to trifle with the feelings of a woman—thus to scorn her love—to refuse the slightest sacrifice on your part! Such a love as mine is capable of turning into the deadliest hate. I need not remind you that I belong not to the same cold clime as you——"

"Sagoonah, all this is ridiculous!" interrupted Mr. Redcliffe. "If you were an Englishwoman, I should conceive that your brain was turned by witnessing the outrageous details of some highly-wrought melo-drama—or that you had stocked your brain with phrases from some preposterous romance. I now insist that this may end; and remember that it is yourself who are the cause that I am speaking thus harshly!"

Sagoonah drew back; and for a few instants she contemplated Mr. Redcliffe in so singular a manner that he was utterly at a loss to fathom what was passing in her mind. It seemed as if the intense fervour of love were about to turn into hate—as if the fire which burnt in her eyes, expressed a passion of one kind that might in a moment flame up into another. But then, blended with all that, there was an expression of mingled compassion and anguish upon her countenance; and she looked, too, as if she still so far clung to hope that she would not yield to the desperation which might make her take some step impossible to be recalled. In a word, the ayah's countenance at that moment was a tablet of the wildest contradictions: the traces of her feelings were there—but they were hieroglyphics impossible to be deciphered.

"Mr. Redcliffe," said Sagoonah, all the fire of her eyes suddenly yielding to a deep and mournful pathos, "you will not doom me to utter misery! Oh, do not—do not! Is there naught that I can do for you? Set me the most impossible of tasks—and I will even achieve the impossible! Put my love to the test—you shall find that it will pass through the ordeal! Will you not have mercy upon me? Look upon me as a woman standing upon the brink of a precipice, and whom one touch of your hand may hurl over into the abyss, or bring back to a position of safety. Oh, my brain is turning! I feel as if I were going mad! Have mercy upon me!"

Sagoonah sank at Mr. Redcliffe's feet: she pressed her hands to her brow—she gave vent to convulsive sobs. She appeared as if distracted.

"I pity you, my poor Sagoonah," he said, bending down to raise her: "but beyond that feeling of compassion——"

"Oh! such a love as mine," interrupted the ayah, strongly emphasizing her words, "is not to be satisfied with mere compassion! Mr. Redcliffe, give me your love—or at least accept mine! But refuse me, and beware lest your scorn suddenly arms me with the venom of a serpent!"

"Sagoonah," answered Mr. Redcliffe, "I can now keep no terms with you: for I see that there is evil in your disposition. A woman who can speak as you have just spoken, must be prepared for any extreme, however desperate. It is my duty to report everything to your mistress——"

Again Sagoonah flung herself upon her knees, exclaiming, "No—no! spare me! be merciful unto me! I spoke at random! Oh! not for a moment—no, not for a moment would I dream of executing whatsoever menace in my despair was thrown out!"

"Well, then, I consent to pardon you," said Mr. Redcliffe. "Yes, I will pardon you. But it is only on this condition—that never henceforth, by word nor even by look——"

"I understand you, sir," interrupted Sagoonah: "and I thank you for this mercy which you are vouchsafing unto me:"—then as she slowly rose up from her suppliant posture, with an expression of countenance which was singularly calm and placid after all the excitement she had just displayed, she said, "Farewell, Mr. Redcliffe. Pray forget, as you have promised to forgive, whatsoever has now taken place."

"I will, Sagoonah—I will both forgive and forget," responded Mr. Redcliffe; "and let me sincerely hope that your reflections in your calmer moments will lead you henceforth to be completely reasonable."

"They will, sir—rest assured that they will," rejoined Sagoonah, with an air of the deepest meekness: and then with the low obeisance of a slave, she turned away from the spot.

At first she proceeded slowly; and if Mr. Redcliffe could only have seen how ominous were the fires which flashed forth from her large dark eyes, his confidence in the assurances she had just given him would have been shaken, if not altogether dispelled. In a few moments she quickened her pace, and glided back into the grounds of the villa. Then Mr. Redcliffe, who had lingered on the spot to follow her with his regards, took his own departure.

CHAPTER CX.

THE BORROWED COSTUME.

The dusk had now closed completely in; and Sagoonah, on regaining the villa, at once ascended to her own chamber. There she sate down to give way to her meditations.

"Did I not almost foresee it?" she thought within herself: "was I not incessantly haunted by the idea that he would scorn my love?—did I not continuously entertain the dread that it were impossible to thaw that frozen heart of his? It has been done—the attempt has been made—it has failed! It were madness to renew it! But now, what remains for me? A hopeles love—or a signal vengeance! Hopeless love? Ah, no! That were cherishing a serpent to gnaw continuously at my heart's core!—that were to surround this very heart of mine with red hot coals and fan them into an incessant blaze. I could not live thus! But vengeance? Ah! and it will not be vengeance on *one* only—but likewise on her to whom he has plighted his troth!"

Sagoonah arose from her seat and paced three or four times to and fro in her chamber. Her better feelings were maintaining a severe struggle against the agitation of the darkest passions of her soul: for she had truly and fondly loved Clement Redcliffe—and the blow which she meditated against him would, she thought, be crushing—overwhelming: it would be death—and yet not death to be inflicted by her own hand!

"Yes, I will do it!" she suddenly ejaculated within herself: "I will do it! I must have vengeance for this slighted love of mine——And besides, even apart from vengeance, I must do that which will effectually prevent him from ever becoming the husband of the Queen. Oh, to serve him as a slave—I who love him so madly!—to behold him in the arms of another—and that other whom I have so long hated as my rival!—No, no: I could not endure it! Oh, I will have vengeance—and my purpose shall be strong to wreak it! There shall now be no more feebleness with me. Did I not arm myself with the courage requisite to plant a dagger in the bosom of Indora? did I not even snatch forth the venomous reptile from its cage? did I not place it in her couch? And if circumstances were hostile to my aims—if those ventures of mine terminated in failure—was it through any lack of courage on my part? No, no! I was bold for all those terrific purposes of mischief;—and shall I prove myself weak now?"

Sagoonah stood in the middle of the chamber as she thus gave way to her sinister reflections; and when her mind was completely made up, she asked herself a final question. It was whether she did verily and truly possess the strength of mind that was requisite for the carrying out of her purpose;—and she answered herself in the affirmative.

"Now away to a magistrate," she said, "to give the information and strike the blow without farther delay! Ah, Christina Ashton, you little thought wherefore you found me so ready a pupil in studying under your tuition the accurate reading of the English language! You little suspected wherefore you discovered me bending with so much earnestness over that huge file of the English newspapers! And now I am about to turn my knowledge to an account—aye, and I know how to set about it! It is but to enter one of the public vehicles, and order the driver to take me to the dwelling of the nearest magistrate!"

Sagoonah was about to issue from the chamber, when she caught sight of herself in a mirror which she passed: and she stopped short.

"This dress," she said to herself, "betrays the poor Hindoo slave: and it may prevent me from obtaining admission to the presence of the magistrate. Ah! I have read how difficult of access are some of the high functionaries of this country—and how much depends upon the appearance and condition of those who seek an interview with them! Were it Queen Indora herself, with her rich apparel, every lace-bedizened lacquey would bow—every door would fly open—and amidst profoundest salutations would she be ushered into the presence of whomsoever amongst England's dignitaries she thus sought out. But I—the humble slave—Oh, it will be different with me! And then too, even if I succeeded in obtaining such an interview, my tale would not be believed: I should be treated with scorn and ridicule. What am I to do?"

And again the Hindoo woman sate down to deliberate within herself: but it was not for very long.

"If I do this," she went on reflecting, "dare I return to the villa? Will it not be known that from me the information was obtained. Besides, if I steal forth now, it will be two or three hours before I could return: my absence would be remarked—and when the blow should smite him almost at the very same time, Indora's suspicions would at once point to myself as the source whence it emanated. I must therefore bid an eternal farewell to this house and my mistress. Aye—and why not? Everything for vengeance! Nor need I go away empty-handed. And, Ah! I will apparel myself in a style that shall insure my admission into the presence of the magistrate whom I am about to seek."

Having thus settled all her proceedings in her mind, Sagoonah assumed a calm expression of countenance, and descended on some pretext to the drawing-room. She there found Queen Indora and Christina seated together, and engaged in conversation. Almost immediately afterwards Christian Ashton called at the villa, to pass an hour with his sister and the Queen; and Sagoonah felt satisfied that she had now ample leisure for the execution of her purpose.

Indora had worn during the earlier part of the day that same apparel—half-European in its fashion, and half-Oriental in its style—which she had worn on the preceding day: but she had changed that dress for an evening costume, according to her wont, when she performed her toilet for dinner. This semi-English, semi-Eastern garb which she had put off, as we have just said, lay upon the couch in Indora's chamber. That chamber was now entered by Sagoonah, who lost no time in apparelling herself in the dress which she thus found upon the bed: and from the Queen's jewel-caskets she took many valuables, as well as a large sum in gold and bank notes which she found in a writing desk that happened to be unlocked. Concealing this wealth about her person, Sagoonah flung a thick and costly veil over her head. A few minutes afterwards she issued noiselessly forth from the front door of the villa. The evening had closed in: but it was a beautiful clear one—and all objects were plainly visible in the flood of argentine lustre which poured down from a cloudless sky.

We must for a brief space leave Sagoonah, just as she is beginning to glide through the garden attached to the villa; and we must return to an individual of whom indeed we have very recently spoken. This was Barney the Burker.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon of the day of which we are writing—and which was the one following his adventures with old Jonathan Carnabie and with Jack Smedley—the Burker bent his steps a second time towards Queen Indora's villa. He was habited in his Jewish garb which we have already described, and which was indeed a most effectual disguise against the peering vision of even the keenest sighted officer of justice. The dense foliage of evergreens, shrubs, and trees which embowered so large a portion of the grounds attached to the villa, afforded the Burker an easy opportunity of penetrating into the enclosure unperceived by any of the inmates of the dwelling. He concealed himself in the midst of that clump which was in the immediate vicinage of the fountain, and which had afforded him a hiding-place on the preceding day.

Presently he beheld Indora walking through the grounds, in company with a gentleman whom he instantaneously recognised. This was the one who had pursued him almost to his capture at Woodbridge, when he had saved himself by plunging into the river,—the same too whom he had seen on the preceding evening at Mr. Chubb's front door. But the Burker was ignorant that the gentleman bore the name of Clement Redcliffe. Queen Indora was then apparelled in the same costume in which the Burker had seen her on the preceding day: namely, the semi-English, semi-Eastern garb, of which we have been speaking. He was not long in perceiving that she gazed with tenderness on her companion: he saw that she loved him. At first the magnificent beauty of the Queen produced upon the Burker an almost overpowering influence, similar to that which he experienced on the previous day: but this gradually wore off, as in his ambush he reflected on the absolute necessity there was for him to accomplish the task assigned by the Duke of Marchmont, and reap those rewards which were to be the price of his iniquity. Besides, the Burker hated Mr. Redcliffe, against whom he entertained a bitter spite on account of the affair at Woodbridge; and he conceived that by fulfilling the Duke of Marchmont's mission in respect to Indora, he should be at the same time wreaking his vengeance on her companion. Thus was it that the miscreant was on the present occasion nerved with all his wonted satanic energies for a purpose of tremendous mischief.

But Mr. Barnes by no means intended to perpetrate the crime while Indora was walking with one who even if he did not prove a protector, might at least serve as a defender. He thought it very probable that Indora might presently remain alone in the garden; at all events he determined to wait. His hiding-place was deeply embowered in foliage: he was buried amidst laurels and bays; and when the dusk should be closing in, that ambush would be perfectly impenetrable.

There were a few moments, however, when the Burker experienced a mortal terror: for a stray dog, entering the grounds, began barking violently in the immediate vicinity of the spot where Barney was concealed. With what bitter imprecations did the miscreant curse the yelping cur! and with what infinite satisfaction would he have driven his long clasp knife into the brute's body! The animal stood upon the edge of the border in the midst of which the evergreens were planted,—barking with all its might: so that the circumstance speedily attracted the notice of Queen Indora and Mr. Redcliffe. They advanced close up to the spot: for a moment the Burker dreaded lest Mr. Redcliffe should make a minute inspection of the place: but immense was the miscreant's relief when that gentleman contented himself with merely driving the animal away.

Shortly afterwards Mr. Redcliffe took his leave of Queen Indora; and then followed the interview between himself and Sagoonah which has already been described. But in the meantime Barney the Burker continued in his ambush. He had often waited hours for an opportunity to accomplish some deed of evil; he was by no means likely to abandon his present enterprise, so long as there might by any probability be a chance of achieving it on this occasion. Besides, as well for him to remain an hour or two more in a place where his safety was comparatively secured, than to go wandering about the bye-streets of the metropolis, or sit down in some public-house, with the chance of being recognised and captured.

The time passed—the shades of evening fell: but as the stars came out and the weather was so mild and beautiful, the Burker thought to himself he would tarry yet a little longer in case Indora should by chance come forth to take another ramble. Presently his ear caught the rustling of a dress at no great distance: he listened with suspended breath: nearer it came — he heard the flowing skirt of the costume sweeping over the grass, and then brushing by some plant overhanging the border. The Burker peeped forth; and the next instant his hand clutched his clasp-knife —for he felt assured that it was Indora of whom he caught sight. Yes—the very same costume which he had seen her wear that day and on the preceding one!—and though the veil was now over her head, yet was it evident beyond all possibility of doubt that this was his intended victim!

All of a sudden there was a rush from amidst the trees: a faint shriek escaped the lips of the

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veiled one: but in the twinkling of an eye the weapon which the miscreant held was buried deep in the victim's bosom. Down she fell without another cry—with only a low brief moan; and at that very instant the Burker was alarmed by the sounds of footsteps approaching from behind the clump of evergreens that had formed his ambush. He darted away—plunged amongst the trees at the farther extremity of the garden—clambered the fence—and gained the adjoining fields.

After making a long circuit, the Burker re-entered London somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Edgeware Road. It was now ten o'clock; and as he passed along at a moderate pace, he said to himself, "At eleven punctiwal every night!—that was the agreement! I shall be in plenty of time; and if so be I wasn't, his Grace would not be pertikler to a minnit or two."

Mr. Barnes remembered that inasmuch as he was personating a Jew of venerable appearance, with a long black gabardine and a grey beard, he must not proceed too quickly, for fear lest the eye of some detective should settle its glance upon him.

"It's a burning shame," said the miscreant within himself, "that one can't walk through the streets of London without standing the chance of having the looks of impertinent curiosity riveted on one's self."

As he thus mused upon his wrongs, the Burker pursued his way; and on looking at the clock in a baker's shop, which was not as yet shut up, he found that he had a good half-hour's leisure before keeping the appointment on which he was bent. He therefore resolved to procure some refreshment: for many hours had elapsed since either food or drink had passed his lips. He entered a low public-house which he knew of old, but where he was tolerably certain he would not be recognised in the costume that he now wore. There were five or six villanous-looking ruffians drinking in the tap-room, which was clouded with tobacco smoke; and the Burker, shrinking with all a Jew's wonted timidity, into the obscurest corner, kept his countenance as much averted as possible, while he ate the bread and cheese and drank the beer which he had ordered. A rapid glance swept over the company, had made him aware that two or three of the men were personally known to him: but it by no means suited his intentions to reveal himself or claim their acquaintance. The company, on their part, were not particularly surprised with the presence of one whom they took to be a Jew: for at the public-house of which we are speaking there was at times a congregation of a variety of characters. Nevertheless the conversation was temporarily suspended when the Burker entered and glided into the corner: but it was speedily renewed again.

"Well, what about that there business, then, Toby?" inquired one of the men thus addressing a companion.

"Why, you see, Tummas," was the response, "he made the old feller as drunk as a fiddler, and no doubt hocussed his grog."

"Yes—you told us that just now," interrupted the individual who had previously spoken. "But did they know as how it was the Burker?—My eyes! what a gulp of heavy wet that old Jew has just took!" he added, in a lowered voice.

"How did they know it was the Burker?" proceeded Toby. "Why, because when the old feller came to his-self this morning, he recalled to mind everything wot had took place; and then he recollected the partickler way in which his friend of the previous night had spoke and wot a rum sort of lingo he had. He even wondered it hadn't struck him at the time: but having no suspicion, and thinking as how it was all right and that he had got into unkimmon good and respectable company, it wasn't much to be wondered at if the old feller was thrown completely off his guard."

"And how did you hear all this, Toby?" inquired one of the company: "how did you get hold of it, old chap? Tell us."

"Cos why I know's summut of Chubb's servant-gal—and she told me all about it. There is a genelman which goes to see the old man—Carnabie, that's his name again; and this genelman, it seems, called at the house last night just at the very moment Barney the Burker was leaving it."

"Well, and I 'spose the traps have had the office tipped 'em, eh?"

"Ah! you may be pretty sure of that," responded Toby: "but it was all done in a very snug and quiet way, so that the business might not get into the papers: for this Carnabie is a parish-clerk somewhere down in the country—and of course it wouldn't be respectable for such an old file to be knowed to get hisself so stupid drunk and make such a fool of hisself."

"Ah! the Burker's a clever cove," said another of the company. "What a hand he must be at a disguise! Blow me, what a hand!"

"I should have knowed him," exclaimed the man who answered to the name of Toby. "There's never a disguise that he could have put on so good as to prevent me from twigging on him."

Here the Burker, having finished his refreshments, thought he had heard enough: but he had very little fear indeed of being recognised by Toby, notwithstanding all the fellow's boasting. Indeed, exhilarated by the malt liquor he had imbibed, the miscreant chuckled inwardly at the opportunity of thus putting the boaster to the test; and rising from his seat, he walked more slowly through the room than when he had entered it. Toby stared at him, but only with a passing curiosity—and not with the faintest suspicion: so that the Burker issued from the public-house chuckling more blithely than before.

He now continued his way towards Pimlico; and he entered a narrow and somewhat obscure street, just as a neighbouring church clock was striking eleven. One side of the street was formed by a wall belonging to the grounds of some mansion: and trees overhung the iron railing which fenced the top of this wall. In the shade of these trees the Burker beheld a gentleman lounging along, and smoking a cigar as if with the ease of a rakish listlessness. This personage was the Duke of Marchmont; and the Burker, accosting him, said, "Good evening, my lord."

"Who are you?" demanded the Duke with haughty curtness: but when the Burker burst out into a coarse though half-subdued chuckle, the nobleman exclaimed, "What! is it possible?—you in this disguise?"

"Yes, my lord: it's my own werry identical self," responded the Burker. "There's been a little shifting of toggery as your Grace perceives——"

"But the business—the mission I entrusted to you?" interrupted the Duke, anxiously and nervously.

"It's done, my lord," was the response chucklingly given.

"Done! Is it possible?" and there was a mingled exultation and terror in the Duke's tone.

"If it wasn't done, my lord," said the Burker, "what the deuce should I be here for? Didn't your Grace tell me to meet you somewhere about this spot at eleven o'clock on any night that I might have summut good to communicate?"

"Yes, yes—true!" ejaculated the Duke, who experienced a bewildering sensation—half in joy at being rid of a dangerous foe (as he thought)—and half in terror lest this new crime should engender new sources of apprehension.

"And now, your Grace, for the reward," said the Burker. "Short reckonings makes long friends."

"We cannot possibly converse here," interrupted the Duke. "Follow me!—but follow me at a distance!"

With these words Marchmont turned abruptly round, and bent his steps towards Belgrave Square,—an occasional glance thrown over his shoulder, showing him that the disguised Burker was following upon his track.

CHAPTER CXI.

THE LIBRARY.

THERE was a grand entertainment at the Duke of Marchmont's house in Belgrave Square on the evening of which we are writing. The reader is aware that the Duchess of Marchmont was an amiable and beautiful lady, but who unfortunately had experienced little happiness in her alliance with the Duke. She had forgiven him for that fearful conspiracy which he had concocted against her some time back at Oaklands: but though she had forgiven, she could not forget. Yet, with the natural generosity of her soul—with the self-sacrificing magnanimity of her disposition—she had studied to resume her wonted demeanour of affectionate regard towards her husband, and likewise to play the part which her high station assigned her in a manner that should prevent the world from suspecting her domestic infelicity. Thus was it that she from time to time gave those entertainments which a lady in her sphere was expected to give: while, on the other hand, the Duke, who to a certain extent studied outward appearances, intimated his pleasure that such receptions should take place at Marchmont House.

Especially, too, at the present time was his Grace anxious to court society, and to seem to have his leisure occupied by dinner-parties and other fashionable pursuits. When a man is either meditating or darkly conniving at a crime, he takes all possible precautions to avert suspicion, and to afford proof that his thoughts and aims were flowing at the time in altogether a different channel. Thus, at this period when he was in reality devoured with anxiety and suspense as to the result of the terrible task he had assigned to the Burker, he appeared to be pursuing a round of pleasure, and was giving splendid entertainments at his mansion in Belgrave Square.

On the evening of which we are speaking, there had been a dinner-party at Marchmont House; and the saloons were afterwards thrown open for the reception of a fashionable assemblage. Dancing commenced in one room: the card-tables were speedily occupied in another. The Duchess of Marchmont assumed a gay and cheerful aspect, though her heart was inwardly a prey to the never-ceasing sense of neglect and ill-treatment—yes, even hatred, which she had experienced on the part of her husband. The Duke likewise dissembled the real state of his own feelings—but for a far different motive: and when he passed through his sumptuously furnished and brilliantly lighted rooms—as if with the zeal of a host who is careful to see that his guests are surrounded by all possible hospitalities—frequent was the whispered remark to the effect "that his Grace had not for a long time seemed so cheerful nor performed his part so affably as on the present occasion."

A little before eleven o'clock the Duke of Marchmont had slipped away from the midst of the gay throng; and throwing on an overcoat, had issued forth by the back part of the premises to proceed to the place of appointment which he had arranged with the Burker. They met, as we have already described; and we left them bending their steps towards Belgrave Square,—the Duke leading the way—his assassin accomplice following at a little distance.

The Duke stopped at a door in a wall which bounded the back part of the spacious stabling establishment attached to Marchmont House; and opening that door by means of a key which he had with him, he waited till the Burker came up. He then conducted the villain through all that department of the premises, and led him unseen by any of the domestics into the library. Wax candles were burning there: for it was usual to light up any part of the spacious establishment which his Grace might think fit to visit. There was a screen at the lower extremity, which partially concealed one of the windows, whence a draught had lately been observed to emanate;—and at the instant that the door opened to admit the Duke and the Burker, a female figure glided behind that screen. The dress, as well as the window-draperies, rustled for a moment: but neither the nobleman nor the assassin heard the sounds, which were indeed slight and transient. The Duke locked the door; and throwing himself upon a seat, said in an anxious voice, "Now tell me all that has occurred."

"It's short and sweet, my lord," replied the Burker; "and I've no doubt will give your Grace the utmost satisfaction. Yesterday I kept watch in the garden of the lady's willa: but I had no opportunity of striking the blow. On t'other hand I had plenty of time to admire her beauty; and I don't mind telling your lordship that it well nigh unsettled me altogether. Well, my lord, circumstances last night made me change my disguise: and now I'll just ask your Grace's candid opinion which suits me best and which I look most genteelest in?"

"A truce to this nonsense!" interrupted the Duke impatiently. "Proceed. I am in a hurry."

"All right, my lord," resumed the Burker. "This arternoon I returned to the willa; and I soon saw her ladyship walking in her garden. She had company with her; and so I was again compelled to wait. But arter a while she came out to walk alone; and then I drove my good clasp-knife so deep into her buzzim that she dropped down with scarce a groan."

"This is true?—you are not deceiving me?" said the Duke, quivering with anxious suspense. "How am I to know that you have done this?"

"Send and inquire if you like, my lord," answered the Burker with brutal flippancy. "Or I'll be bound to say you'll read all about it in tomorrow morning's paper."

"And you are certain that the blow was surely dealt?" demanded the Duke.

"Look you, my lord," responded the Burker, drawing out his clasp-knife. "This blade is a long one: it went right down to the handle: here's the marks of blood upon it; and here's my ankercher, which I wiped it on as I rushed away from the spot."

"Enough!" ejaculated the Duke, averting his eyes from the sickening evidences of the crime which had been committed at his instigation.

"I hadn't failed to observe that the Lady Indoors—or whatever her name was," continued the assassin, "walked about with the whole contents of a jeweller's shop crowded on her person and dress; and I *did* mean to help myself to a few of them trifles. But just arter the blow was struck, I heerd footsteps coming from the direction of the willa; and as the lady had given a sort of skreek when I fust busted out upon her, I in course thought it had been heerd indoors and the servants was a-coming to see what it all meant. So I'd only just time to draw out my clasp-knife from the wound—which was a precious deep one, I know!—and then I scud away as fast as my legs could carry me. Now your Grace knows everythink; and you may give me my reward."

The Duke was in the act of drawing forth his purse—which was crammed with gold and bank-notes—when a strange rustling noise, apparently coming from behind the screen or the closed draperies of one of the windows, fell upon the ears of both himself and the Burker. They started up with dismay in their looks: but this feeling was expressed with a far more ghastly and horror-stricken aspect on the part of the nobleman than on that of the assassin. For a few instants the Duke stood irresolute — a prey to the most agonising torture: then rushing towards the screen, dashed it aside—seized upon the window draperies and tore them asunder. A faint shriek rang forth; and he beheld a lady who was a total stranger to him. An ejaculation of ferocious rage dropped from the lips of the Burker; and his hand was already clutching his clasp-knife,—when the lady fell upon her knees, murmuring, "For heaven's sake spare me! spare me—I beseech you! Your secret is safe!"

Horror at all that she had heard, and wild terror at the menacing aspect of the Burker, were blended in her looks. The Duke of Marchmont was well nigh distracted: all the most frightful perils appeared to be environing him: his brain grew dizzy—his sight became dim—he reeled back a few paces, as if intoxicated with wine.

"Dismiss this dreadful man!—for heaven's sake send him away!" said the lady, accosting the Duke with looks that in terror appealed to him, while with horror they shrank from the ferocious gaze of the Burker. "I have heard nothing—— I mean," she continued confusedly, and in a dreadfully excited manner, "I will keep silent—I will not betray anything—no, not for the world!"

Encouraged by this assurance, and aroused to sudden energy by the desperation of the horrible circumstances in which he found himself placed, the Duke of Marchmont quickly drew forth his purse and a key; and he said to the Burker, "Here—depart! There is more than the reward I promised! Let yourself out by the way that we came! For heaven's sake lose not an instant! Away with you!—get out of London—leave England at once—immediately."

These injunctions were issued in a low, hoarse, but hurried whisper; and hastening to unlock the door of the library, the Duke pushed the Burker thence. The miscreant—judging by the weight and the feel of the purse that one end was heavy with gold and the other crammed with bank-notes—had no reason to tarry any longer; and he succeeded in effecting his exit from the premises without being observed by any of the dependants.

The Duke of Marchmont was left alone with this lady who was unknown to him. He locked the door again: and accosting her with a countenance that was ghastly pale, and in a voice that was now hollow with deeply concentrated emotions in which horror was predominant, he said, "Who are you? and how came you here?"

The lady—who was evidently much relieved by the disappearance of the Burker, and who was naturally of a courageous disposition—had by this time fully recovered her own presence of mind; and she said, "My lord, you have nothing to fear. I know everything; I overheard everything: but let us at once understand each other:"—and then bending her superb dark eyes significantly upon the Duke's countenance, she added, "Your Grace can recompense me for keeping your secret."

"Yes, yes!" he eagerly exclaimed: "anything—everything!—there is nothing you can ask which I will not grant!"

"Good, my lord," she observed: "I knew that we should understand each other. And now unlock that door: for one of your domestics knows that I am here—and he may happen to enter—or rather seek to enter—when it would appear strange to find that the door was secured."

The lady sate herself calmly down: the Duke hastened to unlock the door; and then returning towards her, he also took a seat, anxiously awaiting whatsoever explanation she might have to give. Though still tortured with agonizing feelings, he nevertheless had now leisure to contemplate her more attentively than he had hitherto done. She was apparently about thirty years af age—of tall stature, and splendidly formed. Her countenance was handsome; her hair dark—her eyes, of corresponding hue, large and lustrous. Sensuousness and decision were depicted in the expression of her features, and in the boldness—indeed we might say the hardihood of the looks which she bent upon the Duke. She was beautifully apparelled in ball-costume; and therefore was evidently one of the guests who had been invited to the entertainment—or had at least found her way thither.

"My explanations will not be very long, my lord," she began; "and I repeat my assurance that your Grace has nothing to apprehend. Indeed, that we may all the better understand each other, I will be very candid with you. My life has not always proved the most virtuous that can be conceived. I was once the mistress of an officer in the Guards—subsequently of a rich old Baronet, who very recently died at his country-seat near Ramsgate. I am married: my husband is old enough to be my father—almost my grandfather; and we are poor."

"You are poor?" ejaculated the Duke, clutching eagerly at the avowal. "I will make you rich! I will make you rich! But proceed."

"Certain schemes in which I was embarked," continued the lady, "and which I had hoped would all turn out to my advantage, failed most signally. I came to London to stay with some friends: your Grace knows them—I allude to Sir James and Lady Walmer. I formed their acquaintance at Brighton; and they know nothing of the worst part of my antecedents. They received an invitation from the Duchess to her Grace's ball this evening; and they brought me with them. We arrived late, having been engaged to dine elsewhere. We entered her Grace's saloons just as your lordship was retiring. In your lordship's absence, Captain Walmer, the Baronet's son, offered to introduce to me a partner for a dance. To whom should he thus present me, but that very officer of the Guards whose mistress I was a few years back!"

"Who is he?" inquired the Duke quickly.

"Colonel Tressilian," responded the lady.

"And you yourself, madam—your name? you have not yet mentioned it."

"Mrs. Oxenden," she rejoined. "On being thus presented to Colonel Tressilian I lost not my presence of mind; for I relied upon his honour not to expose me. He bowed as if to a stranger; and I thought that I was safe. He offered me his arm: but instead of leading me to join the dance, he conducted me into an adjoining room, where we found ourselves alone. Then he threw off the mask of a temporary dissimulation, and addressed me with a stern hauteur. It appears that he is acquainted with Sir Edgar Beverley, who has married my sister. Sir Edgar is in London with his bride; and accidentally meeting Colonel Tressilian yesterday, he communicated enough to damage me irreparably in the Colonel's estimation. Therefore Tressilian insisted that I should at once leave the Duchess of Marchmont's ball-room—or else he should deem it his duty to expose my character to her Grace. It was ungenerous, considering the terms on which I had formerly lived with Tressilian: but he was inexorable. I besought him to spare me in respect to the Walmers': but with them also is he intimate—and all that I could obtain from him was a promise of forbearance and silence if in the course of to-morrow I quitted their abode. I withdrew from the ball-room; and a domestic conducted me hither,—where it was my intention to wait until the Walmers' carriage should be announced. To the domestic I pleaded indisposition—but desired that my friends might not be disturbed or annoyed by the intelligence in the midst of their own recreations. Your Grace's domestic has gone to fetch the Walmers' carriage, which was originally ordered to return at two in the morning: and it was the entrance of that footman which I apprehended when I requested your Grace just now to unlock the door."

"And your husband, Mrs. Oxenden?" said the Duke of Marchmont: "where is he?"

"At Brighton," responded the lady; "and I care not if I never see him again. I have explained to you the circumstances which brought me to this library. I had not been here many moments, when the door opened, and I heard a voice say, 'Come in! quick, quick!'—I had been pacing to and fro in an agitated manner: and on hearing persons enter, I was fearful of being questioned relative to the cause of my being here. At that moment I was close to the screen, and stepped behind it—thence gliding behind the window-draperies. I wonder that your Grace heard not the rustling of either the curtains or my dress——But enough! You now understand how it is that I am here."

"And what can I do for you?" asked the Duke. "Money in abundance—riches—gold—gifts——"

"Patience, my lord, for a few minutes!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden: "for I have yet some explanation to give. When I married a man old enough to be my father, it was because I really wished to lead a respectable life—but more for the sake of my young sister than my own. Now, as I have already informed your Grace, certain projects on which I was recently bent, have utterly failed; and my sister is alienated from me. I will not return to my drivelling dotard of a husband: I care not for the farce of leading what is called a respectable life for the future. On quitting Ramsgate, my mind was speedily made up. Availing myself of a long-standing invitation on the part of the Walmers', I came to their house in London. My object in plunging amongst the pleasures of the metropolis shall be frankly confessed. Indeed, my lord," added Mrs. Oxenden, significantly, "there is no need for the existence of *any* secrets between your Grace and me."

"No, no—certainly not!" said the Duke, inwardly recoiling from the intimacy which had suddenly arisen upon the basis of a hideous crime becoming revealed to the ears of this woman who was so ready to take advantage of her knowledge thereof, and who could speak with such a mingling of bold hardihood and cold worldly-minded calculation.

"Well then, my lord," continued Mrs. Oxenden, "I am tired of playing the part of a virtuous and respectable wife, doomed to poverty; and I seek to become the mistress of some great and powerful personage who can give me riches. For this object I came to London: for this object I resolved to plunge into fashionable society. Accident has favoured my purpose more readily than I had dared anticipate, even with the consciousness of a beauty which is not inconsiderable."

"Mrs. Oxenden," replied Marchmont, "it shall be as you desire. To-morrow you will leave the Walmers'. Let it be in the middle of the day. Before noon you shall receive a note from me, intimating where a suitable house is taken for your reception. But remember!—the veil of inviolable secrecy——"

"Shall remain thrown over all that reached my ears this night," replied Mrs. Oxenden, "so long as your Grace performs a generous part towards me."

At this moment the door of the library was thrown open, and a footman exclaimed, "Sir James Walmer's carriage is waiting for Mrs. Oxenden!"

The Duke of Marchmont handed the lady forth with every appearance of a respectful courtesy: they exchanged rapid but significant glances—and the equipage drove away.

The Duke returned for a few minutes to the library, to tranquillise the feelings which were still agitating within him notwithstanding that serene affability of manner which he assumed while escorting the splendid but infamous Mrs. Oxenden forth to the carriage: but it was no easy task for the iniquitous nobleman to quench the flames of the hell that was raging with volcanic power in his breast. It appeared to him as if by means of a crime he had only escaped from the power of one woman to fall into that of another; and he had already seen enough of Mrs. Oxenden to be aware that she would be imperious and exacting—that it was with no lenient hand she would sway the sceptre of despotism over him—but that she would prove his mistress in more senses than one. Vainly did the Duke endeavour to shut out from himself the realities of his position. He could not possibly blind his eyes to the conviction that every attempt which he made to disentangle himself from the web which his crimes had woven, only tightened and drew it the more enmeshingly around him. He shuddered and he trembled as he thought of all these things; and Oh! what would he have given to recall the past, when, as Lord Clandon, he had merely to contend against pecuniary difficulties, but had not as yet steeped his hands in crime!

Exerting himself to the utmost to regain his self-possession, and to banish all these horrible, torturing, harrowing apprehensions which were crowding in upon him, the Duke issued from the library and ascended once more to the ball-room. There he endeavoured to mingle with an appearance of gaiety amidst the throng that was really gay: but pleasure sickened him, like dainties in the presence of one whose appetite is sated and palled. The very lustre of the rooms seemed to make his brain reel: he talked at random—he laughed without reason. His veins felt as if they were running with molten lead: he was glowing with a feverish excitement—intense, agonising. Thus a hectic colour sate like patches of vivid paint upon the ghastliness of his countenance: but the guests were far, very far from suspecting how racked, tortured, and harrowed was the mind of their host. They merely looked at each other and smiled,—thinking that his Grace had, during his absence of an hour or so, dropped in at some still more convivial party where his libations had exceeded the bounds of prudence.

It was half-an-hour past midnight, when the Duke of Marchmont was crossing the landing to pass from the ball-room to the card-room, that a note was presented to him on a silver salver by one of his footmen. He at once perceived that the address was written in a beautiful female hand, but which nevertheless appeared to have been somewhat tremulous, as if with excitement.

"From whom does it come?" asked the Duke, who, with a timidity ever attendant upon a guilty conscience, sought to glean beforehand some assurance that it was not the harbinger of a fresh calamity.

"I do not know, my lord," was the footman's response. "It was brought by a middle-aged man, dressed in plain-clothes—but having the appearance of an upper domestic—such as a steward or butler. He only desired that the note should be given to your Grace; and he immediately departed."

The mystery attending the delivery of the billet—or at least a mystery as it appeared to the Duke's guilty mind—filled him with a cold terror; and proceeding to a room previously unoccupied, he opened the letter. The first glance at its signature seemed to sear his very eye-balls: a cry escaped his lips: he reeled, and would have fallen but that he staggered against a chair. Then he sate down; and Oh! how ghastly was his countenance now!—how that cold mortal dread had chased away fever's hectic spots from his cheeks!—and how fearfully did he groan in anguish! He passed his hand across his haggard eyes: he read the contents of the billet. It fell from his grasp; and he sank back in the chair—not in a swoon—but with a sense of appalling consternation.

And all this while the dancing was going on in the gilded saloons; and numerous lacqueys were arranging a sumptuous repast in the banqueting-room. Every window of the palatial mansion was glowing with light; and the roseate floods of luxury were streaming forth through the crimson draperies and the open portals into the Square. And belated passers-by or houseless wanderers stopped to gaze up at that lordly dwelling—each saying within himself, "Oh, how I wish I was the Duke of Marchmont!"

But if it had been given to any one of these to penetrate with a glance through those walls—to plunge a look into one particular room of that mansion, and to behold the rich and titled owner thereof lying back in his seat overwhelmed with the consternation of horror,—or if it had been possible for some spirit-voice to breathe the astounding truth in the ears of those loiterers and gazers,—the self-murmured words would have been, "Thank God! I am *not* the Duke of Marchmont!"

CHAPTER CXII.

THE WOUNDED AYAH.

We return to Indora's villa. When Sagoonah went forth disguised in the apparel of her mistress, the Queen was seated with Christian and Christina in one of the exquisitely furnished rooms on the ground-floor. The evening was sultry; and on a remark to that effect being made by Indora, Christian rose to open one of the casements. At that very instant a half-stifled scream coming from the garden, reached his ears, as well as those of the Queen and his sister; and the two latter started up from their seats.

Christian sprang forth upon the lawn on which the casement opened, and down to which the window reached,—Indora and Christina closely following him. It was a beautiful starlit evening; and as Christian sped in the direction of the spot whence the cry had seemed to come, he beheld a human form lying upon the gravel walk near the fountain. Ineffable was his amazement on recognising a costume which he had seen Indora wear; and ejaculations of bewildered astonishment burst from the lips of her Majesty and Christina themselves as they the next moment arrived upon the spot. Christian drew aside the veil from the prostrate figure; and the countenance of Sagoonah was revealed!

To raise her up was the work of a moment; and now the appearance of oozing blood drew forth fresh cries of horror and alarm from the lips of those present. The faithful steward Mark and the other domestics of the Queen's household were quickly on the spot. Mark was at once despatched for a surgeon; and Sagoonah was borne into the house. She was insensible: but life was not extinct. There was a deep wound in the region of the right bosom; and the blood was gushing out copiously. She was conveyed to a bed-chamber; and the garments were quickly stripped off by the female domestics,—Indora and Christina being likewise present: but Christian for delicacy's sake had forborne to follow into that chamber until Sagoonah was placed in the couch. The surgeon arrived, and then Christian entered with him.

The wound inflicted upon the ayah was deep and serious: but it was not mortal. The medical man could not however, at this early stage of his ministrations, hold out the positive certainty that she would recover. Everything in the meantime was done that his skill suggested; and then he had leisure to inquire how the murderous attempt had been made. But on this point no one seemed able to give him any satisfactory answer: yet it appeared only too probable that the assassin-blow was intended for the Queen herself, inasmuch as the hapless Sagoonah had been disguised in her raiment.

But here was fresh food for speculation and conjecture; and something had been discovered which was not mentioned to the surgeon,—inasmuch as it pleased Indora to issue a request to Christian and Christina, and a command to her domestics, that silence on that head should be observed: for if Sagoonah should recover, she might be enabled to give some satisfactory explanation—whereas if on the other hand she should perish, the Queen with her wonted generosity was anxious to spare her from the stigma which exposure would affix upon her name. The incident to which we allude was the fact that a quantity of gold and a number of Indora's most valuable jewels were found upon Sagoonah's person, concealed beneath the garments in which she had disguised herself.

The surgeon took his departure, to prepare some medicines which were to be administered to the wounded woman; but he promised to return in the course of an hour or two. Now the Queen, Christian, and Christina,—the first sense of excited horror being over,—had leisure to discourse on the terrible incident that had occurred.

"It was your own life, dear lady," said Christina, taking the Queen's hand and pressing it to her lips, "which was aimed at! Providence has shielded you—though it is fearful to contemplate that a blow has nevertheless been dealt at another. Oh, what a horrible mystery!"

"I am utterly at a loss to conceive what could have been Sagoonah's object," said the Queen, "in apparelling herself in my costume and taking some of my richest gems with her. Could the wretched young woman have meditated robbery and flight?"

"It appears impossible," observed Christian, "to put any other construction upon the circumstances, however much we may be disposed to suspend an opinion in the absence of a positive knowledge or of more criminatory evidence——"

"I have always thought," said Christina, "that Sagoonah was a strange creature——"

"But I always deemed her faithful and most devotedly attached to me!" said the Queen. "I would have staked my existence on Sagoonah's fidelity: I should have deemed her utterly incapable of a dishonest action!"

"It is strange—most strange!" said Christina in a musing tone: and her looks indicated that something peculiar was passing in her mind.

"What is in your thoughts, my dear girl?" asked the Queen earnestly.

Christina conceived that it would be improper to conceal any longer those nocturnal proceedings of Sagoonah which some weeks back had come to her knowledge, and relative to which she had chidden and remonstrated with her. She accordingly explained how she had one night detected Sagoonah poring over a huge file of the *Times*, in contravention of the Queen's injunction; and how on another night she had followed Sagoonah into the chamber where her Majesty was sleeping. Indora listened with mingled alarm and astonishment; and then she became profoundly pensive for several minutes. In reply to questions which her Majesty presently put, Christina detailed the explanations which Sagoonah had given on the two occasions respectively.

"In reference to reading the *Times*," said our young heroine, "Sagoonah pleaded a desire to prosecute her English studies;—and I believed her. In respect to her visit to your ladyship's chamber, she advanced a tissue of superstitious beliefs, the grossness of which I endeavoured to point out. She declared her love for you, and spoke of the dread which she had lest evil spirits should do your ladyship a mischief. Considering that her offences arose from ignorance and not from absolute wilfulness, and that she could not possibly entertain any sinister design, I promised to keep silent upon the subject. Perhaps, dear lady, I should have told you——"

"No, Christina," observed the Queen: "you were generous and kind-hearted—and it is impossible to blame you! There is some dark mystery attached to the proceedings of Sagoonah: but it would be wrong to judge her hastily in a hostile sense. Sometimes the good intentions of individuals wear at the first glance a suspicious aspect, especially when they are executed in secrecy and when it is sought to shroud them in obscurity."

But having thus spoken, Queen Indora again relapsed into a profound pensiveness; and silence prevailed for many minutes in the apartment.

"Do you not remember, lady," asked Christina, at length breaking this silence in a gentle voice, "that Mr. Redcliffe sent you a warning note, of which you spoke to me——"

"Yes, yes, my dear friend!" ejaculated Indora: "I have been thinking of it!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Christian, springing up from his seat; "and this reminds me of a duty as yet unfulfilled. In the bewilderment occasioned by this horrible occurrence, I had forgotten that we should give an immediate intimation to the police——"

"It is already done, Christian," interrupted Queen Indôra. "Did you not hear me speaking to the surgeon on the subject, and intimating my desire that no greater publicity should be given to the occurrence than is absolutely necessary?"

"But the officers of justice will come," exclaimed Christian. "Would it not be well for me to go and fetch Mr. Redcliffe, that he may advise us also?"

At this moment there was a knock at the front door; and Mark entered to say that an inspector of police, with a constable, requested an interview with her ladyship. The Queen ordered them to be admitted;—and we may here remind the reader that the real rank of Indora was generally unknown, and that she passed as an Indian lady of great wealth. But the twins, as well as the faithful Mark himself, knew that she was a Queen—although, at her own request, they continued to address her by much more humble titles.

The inspector and the constable entered the apartment in which Indora was seated with our hero and heroine; and the superior officer said, "We have heard from Mr. Clarkson"—thus alluding to the surgeon—"that an attempt at assassination has been made in your ladyship's grounds but that there are reasons why the affair should obtain as little publicity as possible. Nevertheless, my lady, it is our duty to investigate the matter; for which object we require whatever information you may have to give."

The Queen recited the simple facts of how her ayah had been discovered in the garden in a state of insensibility, and with a deep wound between the bosom and the shoulder. Christian added that after the removal of the wounded woman into the house, he had searched carefully about the spot, but had failed to discover the weapon with which the blow was dealt. The officers went forth to examine the place for themselves,—Christian accompanying them, and Mark attending with a bright lamp—which was however scarcely necessary, for the moon was pouring its full tide of effulgence upon the scene. The officers discerned the traces of large coarse shoes upon the border and on the grass; and they were enabled to establish the fact that the intending assassin must have concealed himself in the midst of the clump of evergreens. They traced his footsteps to the palings which he had leapt on quitting the grounds: they followed them through the fields, until they ceased in the neighbourhood of a road leading out into the country. Then the officers returned to the villa.

"I presume," said the inspector to Queen Indora, "that your ladyship has no idea whether any one could have conceived a revengeful feeling towards your Hindoo servant or yourself——"

"Rest assured," interrupted the Queen, "that if I could point out the assassin, justice should not be cheated of its due! But candidly speaking, there are circumstances within my knowledge which may possibly unravel themselves, and lead to a development of this mystery. Understand me well! Though these circumstances to which I allude, are known to me, yet they do not point out who the assassin himself may be. More I cannot say,—unless it be to add that the greater the publicity given to this occurrence, the less will be the chance of those circumstances developing themselves from mysterious obscurity into an intelligible light."

"If the woman should die, my lady," said the inspector,—"or if accident should enable us to arrest any one on suspicion of having perpetrated this deed,—it will be necessary for your ladyship to reveal at a Coroner's Inquest, in case of the death—or before a magistrate, in case of the arrest of a suspected person—all those circumstances, to which your ladyship has just alluded."

"Living in this country under the protection of its laws," responded Indora, "I shall assuredly conform to them."

"At the same time," continued the inspector, "after all your ladyship has said, we will keep the whole matter as quiet as possible: because, so far from doing anything to defeat justice, we, as its functionaries, are bound to succour and advance its proceedings. Does your ladyship——"

"It were well if you questioned me no farther," interrupted the Queen. "I have told you as much as under circumstances I can possibly impart."

"Yet there is the fact," said the inspector, "that your servant was clad in apparel belonging to your ladyship:"—for Mr. Clarkson had told the police-authorities this much, though the affair of the ayah's self-appropriation of the gold and jewels remained unknown alike to surgeon and constables.

"Most solemnly do I assure you," said the Queen, "that I am utterly at a loss to comprehend my ayah's motive in thus appareliing herself in my clothes. But whatever it were—whether a mere freak, or whether for some less venial purpose—she has been sufficiently punished."

"And your ladyship does not mean to charge her with anything?" asked the officer.

"Charge her?" ejaculated Indora, almost indignantly: "no! certainly not!"

"Her ladyship would rather that this interview should end," whispered Christian hastily to the inspector; and at the same time he slipped a couple of sovereigns into the officer's hand.

"Very good, sir—very good!" observed the inspector, pocketing the amount. "We would not for the world give her ladyship any unnecessary trouble or annoyance—not for the world, sir! We shall let the matter rest until we receive any fresh instructions from her ladyship."

The inspector and the constable then took their departure; and the moment they were gone, the Queen said to Christian, "Now, my young friend, you shall proceed to Mr. Redcliffe, and tell him what has occurred. The carriage will be ready for you in a few minutes."

Our hero accordingly set off. It was now past ten o'clock at night; and he found Mr. Redcliffe at the lodgings in Mortimer Street. That gentleman was horrified at the intelligence conveyed to him; and he lost not a moment in accompanying

Christian in the carriage to the villa. During the drive thither, Mr. Redcliffe learnt from our hero's lips everything that had taken place; and he was particular in eliciting from Christian all that had been said by the police-officers or in their presence. He then fell into a profound reverie; and the silence was not broken until the villa was reached.

In the meanwhile the surgeon had returned. Sagoonah was unconscious of all that was passing around her: but still there was no immediate fear for her life. Christina, overcome and exhausted by the excitement of feeling which she had sustained, had sought her couch at the earnest entreaty of the Queen: while Indora herself had been sitting by the bed-side of Sagoonah, who knew not that the mistress whom she had intended to wrong so deeply by wreaking her vengeance upon Clement Redcliffe, was thus kindly ministering to her there.

Mr. Redcliffe and Queen Indora consulted together alone for a considerable time. It was impossible for them to doubt as to the source whence a horrible vindictiveness had emanated: antecedent circumstances only too plainly showed that the Duke of Marchmont must be the instigator of the assassin-deed. But then, who was the assassin—or rather, we should say, the intending murderer? From all that Mr. Redcliffe had previously communicated to the Queen, she had felt convinced that it was *not* Mr. Wilson Stanhope; and hence had she so emphatically expressed to the police-officers her incompetency to point to any particular individual. Mr. Redcliffe now shared her Majesty's opinion that the perpetrator of the deed was not Stanhope: for he had heard and seen enough in the conservatory of Oaklands to be enabled to judge—aided by the teachings of his experience in the mysteries of the human heart—that Stanhope, though unprincipled and profligate, was not the man to go to such a tremendous extreme. It was therefore evident that the Duke of Marchmont had found some other instrument to execute—or attempt the execution of his foul purpose against Queen Indora's life: but still there were circumstances which prevented Mr. Redcliffe from denouncing the Duke before all the world; and the same considerations had led Indora to abstain from mentioning his Grace's name to the police-constables.

"Indora," said Mr. Redcliffe, taking her hand and pressing it with a grateful warmth, "this frightful danger did you draw down upon your own head by your magnanimous intervention in those affairs wherein I am deeply interested! But Providence has willed that you should escape the peril—and the blow has smitten another. I need scarcely remind you that the moment has not yet come when we can deal openly with him whose name it sickens and appals me to mention: but yet something must be done to paralyse him—to smite his soul with a new terror—and thus prevent him from daring to think of the renewal of his assassin purpose."

"Yes, my dear Clement," responded the Queen, "the tangled skein must go on gradually unraveling itself—gradually but surely, as for some time past it has been doing. And then——"

"But in the meantime, I repeat," interrupted Redcliffe, "something must be done. Ah! first of all, for a moment, let us talk of Sagoonah. You have just told me of her singular behaviour, as explained to you by Miss Ashton—how she pondered over the newspaper files by night—and how she sought your own chamber. These things are suspicious enough: but methinks that to a certain extent I have the power of reading them. Were it not for the dreadful circumstances of this evening, I should have abstained from revealing to you something that occurred—and it is this."

Mr. Redcliffe then proceeded to explain all that took place between himself and Sagoonah—how she had declared her love—and how for a moment she had menaced him. He stated likewise that he had on previous occasions been struck by the peculiar flashings of her eyes—and how those looks had ever haunted him, as if fraught with a sinister and unknown terror, and as if being ominous of evil. Indora listened with profoundest atonishment—an astonishment so great that it for a while absorbed all other feelings: but she was too noble-hearted and of too lofty a disposition to experience the anger of mere jealousy, or any vexation arising from a presumptuous rivalry on the part of her ayah.

"And now what think you?" she inquired: "what do you deduce from all that you have been telling me?"

"That Sagoonah has fathomed my secret," responded Mr. Redcliffe; "and that she pored over the files of the *Times* in order to obtain a complete insight into the past. That woman was resolved to hold me in her power. I understand her disposition well. If she could not have my love, she would give me her hatred: if she could not bend me to her purpose, she would wreak upon me her vengeance."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the Queen, with anguish depicted upon her countenance: "and it was all my fault, dear Clement, that the wretched Sagoonah has been enabled to penetrate the mysteries which surrounded you—those mysteries which I had so fondly hoped were unveiled only to myself! It was through me—alas! through me that those newspapers were thus thrown in her way. Oh! I have been indiscreet: but I could not possibly foresee——"

"Blame not yourself, Indora—blame not yourself," said Mr. Redcliffe, again pressing the Queen's hand fervently. "All that you did was for the very best of purposes; and it would seem as if Providence were upon our side: for rest assured that Sagoonah was bent upon some design of mischief against myself, or it may be against you, at the moment when the assassin's dagger struck her down. It is only too evident that she was quitting your service for ever. She had laden herself with your gold and your jewels that she might have wealth in her possession: she had dressed herself in your apparel, either that she might throw off the character together with the garb of a menial—or else that she might personate you in some manner that should bring dishonour upon your name. Yes—these are the only alternatives which the circumstances present to our view: and the wretched woman has received a, signal chastisement on the very threshold of her iniquitous purpose."

"Oh, that she could have been so wicked!" exclaimed the Queen; "and that I should have placed such confidence in her! I loved Sagoonah—yes, I loved her: or else never, never should I have unbosomed my secrets unto her!"

"She is now stretched upon a couch," observed Mr. Redcliffe solemnly, "from which she may perhaps never rise again: or on the other hand, if she should recover, it will only be after a long and lingering illness;—and thus for the present she is robbed of her sting in respect to both you and me. More than once have I seen that Providence is really working in my behalf; and if Sagoonah should die, it will be by heaven's dispensation which chooses to remove a reptile from our path: whereas if she should recover, it is to be hoped that during the interval that she must remain powerless for renewed mischief, the tangled skein will have completely unravelled itself, and I shall have no longer any reason to dread her knowledge of my secret. But now, my dear Indora, let us speak in respect to yourself:—for measures must be taken to ensure your safety."

"Let nothing be done, Clement," responded the Queen, "which may in any sense militate against your own interests or tend to compromise yourself. You know—you know," she added, with a look of ineffable tenderness—but one that was full of a soft pure delicacy of holiest and chastest love as well as of the heart's illimitable devotion,—"you know that I would cheerfully lay down my life for your sake!"

"I know it, Indora—I know it," answered Mr. Redcliffe, profoundly touched by this fresh proof of the Queen's attachment. "But think not for an instant I am so selfish as to suffer your safety to be any further compromised on my account. No, no—it must not be! Something shall be done—and that quickly too. Ah, a thought strikes me! Take writing materials, Indora—sit down and pen a few lines to my dictation."

Her Majesty at once complied with Mr. Redcliffe's desire; and as she sate at the table in the drawing-room where this discourse took place,—Mr. Redcliffe slowly pacing to and fro, and with various feelings successively depicting themselves upon his countenance, dictated the following lines:—

> "The assassin-blow which was intended for myself has smitten another. You will start at these words: horror will seize upon you: your wretched conscience will tell you that heaven itself is shielding *me* and warring against *you*. And you will feel, too, how useless it is for you to contemplate fresh iniquities in the hope of protecting yourself from the consequences of past ones. The web which you yourself have woven, is closing in around you. I do not bid such an one as you to confess everything and thereby make as much atonement as you can for the past: because I know that you will cling with a frenzied and desperate tenacity until the very last to that position which you hold. But I warn you, my lord, against a renewed attempt at a crime for which I am prepared. At the very first indication of such a proceeding on your part, will I remorselessly reveal whatsoever I know; and the hand which grasped that portentous dagger within the walls of Oaklands on an occasion to which I need not more particularly refer,—that same hand, I repeat, shall pen a narrative of all which concerns yourself, and to the Queen of England shall this narrative be sent. Tremble therefore at the precipice on whose verge you stand; and remember that if you again dare me to precipitate you into the abyss, nothing shall deter me from thus hastening a consummation which the progress of circumstances will otherwise sooner or later work out.
>
> "INDORA."

The hand of the Queen trembled as it guided the pen which traced these lines; and as we have already said, varied were the feelings which successively found expression on the features of Mr. Redcliffe. It was in a low deep solemn tone that he dictated the note; and twice or thrice he pressed his hand as if in anguish to his brow. It was evident that a train of horrible memories—a troop of portentious antecedents, were conjured up by the words of that letter to the mental vision alike of Clement Redcliffe and of Queen Indora. The billet was finished: it was directed and sealed; and the Queen said, "Are you determined, Clement, to despatch this missive?"

"Yes, Indora—I am resolved," was the answer: "it is absolutely necessary. We will send it by the faithful Mark; and he shall be instructed to deliver it in Belgrave Square this very night,—without saying from whom it comes, and without tarrying for any reply."

This was accordingly done; and soon afterwards Mr. Redcliffe took his departure with Christian Ashton.

CHAPTER CXIII.

A WOMAN'S LOVE.

THE reader has seen the effect which Indora's letter produced upon the wretched Marchmont. If the writing of it had conjured up troops of hideous memories to sweep through the brains of the Queen and of Mr. Redcliffe, the reading of the document had assuredly done no less in reference to the Duke. For nearly half-an-hour did he remain like one stupefied with horror and appalled with dismay, in the apartment to which he had retired: it appeared to him as if he were in the midst of a frightful waking dream. Suddenly he started up from his chair, and dashed his hand with frantic violence against his forehead, as if he sought to beat in his own skull, or crush his own tortured, harrowed brain. Oh, the misery, the anguish, the crucifixion of feeling which this wretched man endured at that moment! Take all the horrors which have characterised the most frightful scenes ever enacted on the theatre of the world—the horrors of condemned cells, death-beds, or battle-fields—sum them all up—aggregate, compound them—extract their most refined essence—and it were nothing, nothing in comparison with the hideous tortures experienced by the Duke of Marchmont *now*. Oh! the deadly strife at Arbela, at Pharsalia, at Waterloo, or at Inkerman,—even these were as nothing in comparison with the stupendous concurrence of horrors which now found a focus in the soul of the Duke of Marchmont!

But he must endeavour to reflect upon his position: he must deliberate with himself. Reflection and deliberation!—were these possible with one in his agonised state of mind? We have said that he started up from his seat: he struck his hand with violence against his brow. He paced to and fro: he felt that he was staggering and reeling like a drunken man: he sank down into his seat again, groaning heavily—and, Oh! how mournfully, how lugubriously, how despairingly! His eye fell upon the note, which had dropped from his hand and lay upon the carpet. He snatched it up, and read it again. Yes—it was all as his horrified memory retained its contents. Again starting up from his seat, he applied the note to a wax-taper; and when the flame seized it, he threw it into the grate. It then for a moment appeared as if he breathed more freely; and he said to himself, "Let me think on all these things."

In order to concentrate his ideas, he rested his elbows upon a table; and covering his countenance with his hands, pressed the fingers upon his eyelids to keep them closed—so that by shutting out external objects, he might be the better able to turn all his attention inwards. He felt that he was in the position of a general besieged in a town towards which the enemy were gradually advancing: the trenches were being pushed nearer and nearer—mines were being formed—batteries were being raised—and he could not anticipate when the final attack should be made. Nor could he altogether understand with what weapons the enemy were fighting; and therefore he was at a loss to devise the means for strengthening his own position. The longer he reflected, the more bewildering grew his reflections: the longer he deliberated, the more perplexing became his deliberation.

"Indora knows much—and if not everything, at least *too much!*" he thought within himself. "But if so, why does she linger and tarry ere striking the final blow? Or is it that she only suspects, and is now engaged in accumulating proofs? Who is she? and what are my affairs to her? Can it be possible that *he* really lives? Yes, yes! Fool that I am to endeavour to blind myself to the tremendous truth! Have I not seen him? But does he know Indora? is there aught in connexion between them? Ah! if so, he may be found at her house—he may visit her: she may be his wife—or his paramour? Who knows? What if I were to strike a tremendous blow and hand him over to the grasp of justice? No, no: caution must be used! That blow might rebound upon myself. And who is it that has been stricken by the bravo's dagger instead of Indora? How could the mistake have occurred? Oh, all this is dreadfully bewildering! My soul is on fire—my heart burns: it is not blood which flows in my veins—it is molten lead. My very brain is seething in boiling oil. The pangs of hell are upon me now! Oh, my God! there *must* be a hell hereafter; for there is even one in this life!"

And the wretched Duke of Marchmont, removing his hands from his countenance, and opening his eyes, glanced around him with ghastly shuddering looks of horror, as if he dreaded to behold Satan himself standing near, clothed in all the infernal majesty of those terrors which belong to his awful sovereignty.

"And then this woman too!" ejaculated the Duke, thus suddenly and abruptly resuming his silent reflections: "this woman who has discovered my secret!"—and he alluded to Mrs. Oxenden: "can I succeed in bribing her to silence? Yes, yes, this at least is practicable! But, Oh! what perils environ me! A spark may cause the explosion of a mine beneath my feet: a breath may destroy me! That villain!"—now alluding to the Burker: "if by accident he should be captured, he might tell everything. And if proof were demanded, how could I now indignantly repel the charge of such a miscreant, when he would demand that Mrs. Oxenden should be found and brought forward to corroborate his statement?"

At this instant the door of the room opened, and the Duchess of Marchmont made her appearance. The beautiful and amiable Lavinia came alone: she entered timidly and hesitatingly, with anxiety depicted upon her countenance; and she stopped short on perceiving how ghastly and how haggard were the looks of her husband, notwithstanding the sudden attempt which he made to assume an air of mental composure.

"My dear Hugh!" she said, again advancing towards him, "I fear that something dreadful has occurred to distress you?"

"Something dreadful?" he ejaculated, half fiercely, half affrightedly: "what mean you?"

"Oh! do not be angry with me, my dear husband," said the Duchess laying her fair white hand upon his arm, and looking up entreatingly into his countenance. "Believe me, I am not indifferent to your welfare——"

"Oh, indifferent indeed!" cried the Duke, affecting to laugh scornfully. "Perhaps you have come to tell me that you have forgiven me for my past conduct—as you have already told me on more than one occasion: and you think that I shall go down upon my knees to thank you?"

"No, my lord," replied the Duchess, the tears gushing from her eyes: "I neither think nor expect anything of the kind. I seek no self-humiliation on your part. But I cannot forget that I am your wife: I cannot forget that the vows which I took at the altar, pledge me to certain duties which must be fulfilled——"

"Enough of this maudlin nonsense, madam!" interrupted the Duke. "I understand you full well. In thus speaking of your own duties, you insidiously and cunningly seek to remind me of mine."

"No—you wrong me again! you wrong me, my dear Hugh!" said the amiable Duchess, the tears flowing faster from her eyes. "Will you put me to the test? Will you tell me wherefore you are afflicted?—and you will see how profoundly I can sympathize with you. Oh, for one kind word from your lips!"

"And why do you think that I *am* afflicted?" demanded the Duke quickly. "In short, what do you mean?"

"There is something in your manner—and—pardon me if I add that there is something also in your looks which prove but too unmistakably that you are afflicted. Oh! I declare solemnly, Hugh," continued the Duchess, "that your interests are dear to me—very dear to me!—and I have seen this evening how you have laughed with a hollow laugh—how you have spoken incoherently: and then too ——but pardon me for what I am going to say ——I happened to overhear one of the domestics say to another that you had received a letter a mere glance at which had seemed to strike as if with a sense of some misfortune."

"Ah! you overheard *that?*" ejaculated the Duke, who could scarcely prevent himself from stamping his foot and crying out with rage. "Then you watch me—and you listen to conversations——"

"Oh! I entreat your forbearance, my lord," said the Duchess imploringly: "not for worlds would I give you offence! I have often and often seen that a singular and painful expression has flitted over your countenance: and I have been afraid ——yes, I have been afraid," continued Lavinia meekly, "that it was on account of myself. But to-night your looks and manner have been so peculiar——and then too, the circumstance of that letter——in a word, my dear Hugh, I was resolved to take a bold step and speak to you in a way which I have not before ventured upon. Will you forgive me? will you attribute my proceeding to its true motive? And listen to me, dear Hugh," continued Lavinia, with her tearful countenance upturned towards the Duke; "if there be anything I can do to contribute to your happiness—or if my presence be hateful to you, tell me so, and I will leave you——"

"Ah! you would abandon me?" ejaculated the Duke, scarcely knowing at the moment what he was saying—but probably speaking from the impulse of one who felt that he was not in a position to part with a single friend who was in any way interested in his welfare: "you would abandon me? —and perhaps you would league yourself with my enemies?"

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed Lavinia vehemently: "never, never! But, Oh! your words are a revelation! You have enemies? Tell me who they are: tell me how their enmity is developing itself. Oh! now, my dear Hugh, you can put my affection to the test—and you will see that I have really known how to forgive and forget all the past!"

"Ah, this constant recurrence to the past!" ejaculated the Duke impatiently.

"I meant it not as a reproach—much less as an offence," said Lavinia, deprecatingly and earnestly. "I only wish you to understand that I am the same towards you in respect to my duty as I ever was: and it requires but one kind word from your lips to make me the same towards you in respect to love."

There are times when the hearts of even the vilest and most worthless of men are susceptible of the influence of woman's love, and when the softness of that feminine devotion has an ineffable soothing balm for the wounded spirit, even though that spirit be tortured by the suicidal inflictions of its own crimes. Such was the state of the Duke of Marchmont now; and a strong revulsion of feeling took place within him. For a long period he had hated his wife—he had treated her with cold neglect, as well as with flagrant indignity: but now all of a sudden his heart seemed to warm towards her—he looked upon her countenance—he saw that it was tearful—and he knew that those tears were flowing for himself!

"Yes, Lavinia," he said, "I am unhappy—and I have enemies! I do not deserve this kindness at your hands—I feel that I do not!"

"Oh, my dearest husband!" murmured the Duchess, taking his hand and pressing it to her lips: "you have spoken to me in a tone and in a manner which in one sense has given me happiness, but which in another has filled me with affliction. You seem to promise me a restoration of your love and confidence; and it is this that makes me happy. On the other hand, you tell me that you yourself are unhappy and that you have enemies; and it is this which smites me with sadness. Who are these enemies of yours? If you have given them a right to persecute you, may they not be moved by the intercessions of a woman?—and if without reason they are persecuting you, may they not be turned into a right path by the remonstrances of your wife, on whose head would redound any evil which happened to yourself?"

"Lavinia," answered the Duke, as an idea struck him, "it is possible that you can serve me ——yes, yes—you can if you will!"

"And I will!" exclaimed the Duchess vehemently: "you know that I will!" she added with impassioned energy. "Oh! it would indeed delight me to be of service to you—to dispel the cloud from your brow—to give back peace to your looks! Tell me how all this may be done. And ah! now I bethink me, if the revelations you may have to make be of a character to unveil some weakness on your part, think not for an instant that I shall retreat from my pledge, or that I shall with the less energy undertake whatsoever mission you may confide to me!"

"You are sure of this, Lavinia?" said the Duke impressively, and gazing upon her with earnestness. "Come now—pause and reflect. I know the purity of your nature—I know the delicacy of your mind; and if anything should transpire at all calculated to shock you——"

"Set at rest these apprehensions," said the Duchess: "I beseech you to banish them from your mind. Oh! so far from shrinking at the task which I am undertaking, I accept it with cheerfulness: for I may perhaps hope that it will revive somewhat of your love towards me."

"Lavinia," rejoined the Duke in a low deep voice, while he gazed fixedly upon his wife, "I shall experience the deepest gratitude towards you; and gratitude, you know, is a sentiment which under certain circumstances expands into love. On the other hand, I fear lest the love you experience for me——"

"Will be impaired?" ejaculated the Duchess. "No, no—impossible! Give me an opportunity of proving my love—and I shall love you all the more for having done this. I do not deceive you as to my motives——I am seeking the return of your confidence and of your love. This I would purchase at almost any price; and therefore think not that the past in respect to yourself will shock me. I shall look upon it as something to be forgotten!"

"I thank you beforehand, Lavinia—yes, beforehand accept my gratitude!" exclaimed the Duke. "But no more to-night! To-morrow I will tell you what it is that I require at your hands. Return to your guests at once——and again, Lavinia, accept my gratitude!"

The Duke took her hand and raised it to his lips. It was not altogether an act of dissimulation, nor for the purpose of cajoling one whom he sought to render serviceable in the terrible difficulties of his position: but it was that in the midst of these difficulties he found one who was prepared to befriend him and who would devote herself to his cause. Lavinia, by her amiable conduct, was making a wife's love necessary as it were to a man who had hitherto proved a vile husband: she was exercising that soft feminine influence to which we have before alluded, and at the very moment when it was so much needed to soothe and strengthen the tortured spirit of him who was thus brought to acknowledge it. He took her hand, we say: but she, bursting into tears, threw herself into his arms, weeping and sobbing convulsively. There was happiness and there was sorrow in her soul: there was joy and there was grief,—joy at being thus enabled to play the part of the ministering angel—but grief at the thought that her husband should have woes and cares requiring such ministration. Yes—she sank upon his breast; and as the Duke contemplated that beautifully handsome woman—now only in her thirty-third year—whose tall figure was so finely formed—and the masses of whose light auburn hair floated upon shoulders and a neck of dazzling whiteness,—when he saw the large blue eyes upturned towards him, looking so beautiful in their tenderness, even through their tears,—when, in a word, his glance swept over the entire assemblage of charms which graced his wife, the Duke of Marchmont felt that his soul was touched, and a pang of remorse smote him on account of all his past conduct towards her. His arms encircled her waist—he strained her to his heart; and in a broken voice he murmured, "Would to heaven, Lavinia, that I had ever remained worthy of such a love as this!"

The Duchess besought her husband not to allude painfully to the past; and wiping away her tears, she smiled sweetly upon him,—observing, "You are about to put my devotion to the test: fear not that it will recoil from aught which may transpire while working in your cause. You know not, my dear husband, how far a woman's devotion may extend!"

"To-morrow, Lavinia—to-morrow," rejoined the

Duke. "I will tell you what you are to do for me, and how you may serve my cause."

The Duchess again smiled sweetly upon her husband, and then quitted the room.

"Yes—she can serve me," said the Duke to himself as soon as he was again alone. "She is loving, and she is faithful; and whatever may come to her knowledge, she at least will not betray me. No, no—she will assist me until the very last!"

But as the reader may have understood, the amiable Lavinia little suspected how deeply her husband had immersed himself in the flood of iniquity: she could conceive no greater amount of guilt than that of which he had been culpable towards herself, as recorded in some of the earlier chapters of this narrative. She had vowed that she would not suffer herself to be deterred by aught which might come to her knowledge while acting on his behalf; and the affectionate lady revelled in dreams of comfort and happiness, peace and love, to be enjoyed with him towards whom she was exhibiting so much magnanimous devotion.

The newspapers of the following morning contained a paragraph relative to the occurrence at Indora's villa; and it may be as well for us to make the reader aware of the extent to which the particulars thereof had transpired. The paragraph ran in the ensuing manner:—

"MYSTERIOUS ATTEMPT AT ASSASSINATION.—A beautiful and somewhat secluded villa, situated in the neighbourhood of Bayswater and Notting Hill, was last evening the scene of a crime which is enveloped in considerable mystery. The villa thus alluded to, is inhabited by an Eastern lady of rank and fortune, who, it is believed, was impelled by curiosity to visit our shores. Amongst the domestics in the service of the Lady Indora, is a beautiful Hindoo woman, named Sagoonah. Last evening Sagoonah, while walking in the garden attached to the villa, was assailed by some unknown miscreant, who inflicted upon her a severe wound with a knife or other sharp instrument. The cry which the unfortunate woman uttered, reached the ears of the Lady Indora; and her ladyship, accompanied by some guests whom she was entertaining at the time, rushed forth into the garden. The unfortunate Sagoonah was discovered senseless on the ground, wounded in the manner already described; and she was at once conveyed into the house. Surgical assistance was immediately procured; and we are happy in being enabled to state that there is no reason to despair of Sagoonah's eventual recovery. The police were quickly informed of the circumstance; and on examining the premises, they traced the footsteps of the assassin for some little distance, until the marks altogether disappeared. The Lady Indora is quite unable to account for the murderous attack made upon her dependant; and thus for the present the deed is enveloped in the darkest mystery."

Such was the paragraph inserted in the morning journals: and the Duke of Marchmont was thereby made aware of the fact that it was the ayah Sagoonah who had been stricken by the Burker's weapon. He could only account for it by the conjecture that the Burker must have made some extraordinary mistake: but his mind was relieved of a considerable load, inasmuch as it was evident that Indora was maintaining a profound silence in respect to her knowledge that he himself was the instigator of a crime of which it was intended that she should be the victim.

On the morning of which we are speaking, the Duke was breakfasting with his wife; and while reading the newspaper, he gave vent to an ejaculation which startled her Grace.

"This is extraordinary!" he exclaimed: and directing Lavinia's attention to the paragraph, he bade her peruse it.

"It is dreadful!" observed the Duchess when she had read the brief narrative. "But why did it elicit that ejaculation from your lips?"

"Because, my dear Lavinia," the Duke answered, addressing her in those affectionate terms to which she had long been so completely unaccustomed, "it is to this very villa that you are to proceed for me—and it is this self-same Lady Indora whom you are to see."

The Duchess was astonished at these announcements: but still not for a single instant did she imagine that her husband could have any connexion with the crime recorded in the paragraph. She accordingly said, "You have only to express your wishes, Hugh, and they shall be fulfilled."

"I told you, Lavinia, last night," continued the Duke, "that I have enemies who are working against me; and the Lady Indora is one. Ah! I see that the colour mounts to your cheeks—but your suspicion is wrong: there has been no unlawful connexion between that Eastern lady and myself. Do not ask me to explain anything——"

"No. Tell me how to act," said Lavinia, "and blindfold will I obey you."

"Go to Indora's villa," proceeded the Duke of Marchmont; "ask for an interview with her ladyship—tell her who you are—say that you are the Duchess of Marchmont—and then——"

"And then?" said Lavinia, perceiving that her husband hesitated.

"And then," proceeded the Duke, "tell Indora that you have heard from my lips that she is at war with me: say that without having given you the slightest details, I have nevertheless acknowledged that she has reason to complain against me—use all the power of your intercession that there may be peace between us—hesitate not, Lavinia, to humble yourself, if necessary, in the presence of that Eastern lady—when addressing her, speak as the wife of him with whom she is thus at war—nay, if needful, go down upon your knees and beg that for your own sake that hostility may cease!"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Lavinia, a blighting, withering suspicion now darting in unto her mind: and while becoming deadly pale, she glanced towards the newspaper.

The Duke, averting his countenance, affected not to have caught that ejaculation from his wife's lips, nor to perceive the agitation which had smitten her: and he said, "You have promised, you know, to obey me blindfold! You have already won my gratitude—and if you value my love, *that* likewise will become your's."

The Duchess was about to implore her husband in impassioned terms to set at rest the horrible suspicion which had just flashed in unto her mind,—when she said to herself, "No, it is impossible!—he is incapable of such a deed! Besides, it happened to the servant—and naught can regard her which may have passed between her mistress and him!"

Then the Duchess felt glad in her own mind that she had kept back the words that she was about to utter: for she fancied that they would have been outrageously insulting to her husband.

Besides, when she now again looked at him, and saw that he had a calm demeanour, she naturally supposed that he himself could not have for an instant conjectured that such a suspicion had entered her mind.

"And when am I to go?" she asked: "when shall I pay this visit to the Lady Indora?"

"Without delay, Lavinia," responded the Duke. "Let the carriage be ordered—and proceed thither at once. Perhaps it would be as well if you were to prepare a note beforehand, containing some such words as these:—'The Duchess of Marchmont earnestly requests an immediate interview with the Lady Indora.'—This will ensure you admission: whereas if you merely sent in your card, it might be refused. Will you do all this, Lavinia?—and will you likewise promise me that whatever you may hear—whatever the Lady Indora may tell you——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Duchess hurriedly: "I faithfully promise that whatever she may tell me, shall not deter me from my purpose of serving your cause to the best of my endeavours!"

Thus speaking, Lavinia hastened from the room, to prepare her toilet for the visit which she had to pay. Again had that withering, blighting suspicion flashed in unto her mind in spite of herself: for it struck her at the moment that she beheld something peculiar in her husband's look:—and then, too, that constant reiteration of the entreaty that she would not be shocked at anything she might hear concerning him, naturally excited the suspicion which connected the Duke in some way or another with the paragraph in the newspaper. But Lavinia was resolved to perform her promise;—and doing her best to dispel that sickening suspicion, she took her seat in the carriage which was to bear her to Indora's villa.

We will not dwell upon the various conflicting ideas which agitated the mind of the Duchess as she was conveyed towards her destination. She shuddered as the carriage halted at the gate leading into the grounds where so foul a deed had been perpetrated on the previous night; and she inwardly murmured, "Heaven forbid that the hostility which seems to exist between this lady and my husband, can have any reference to an episode so terrible as *that*—or that it forms one of the causes of offence for which I am to humble myself even to the kneeling at her feet!"

The summons at the gate was answered by the faithful Mark,—who, perceiving a splendid equipage with a ducal coronet upon the panels, hastened to the carriage-window, to which a beautiful lady was beckoning him.

"Have the kindness," said Lavinia, "to give my card and this note to the Lady Indora, and I will await any message you may bring back."

Christina Ashton had gone with her brother to pay a visit to Isabella Vincent; and Indora was alone in the drawing-room, when at about the hour of noon the ducal equipage drove up to her gate. She wondered who the visitress could be: for she caught a glimpse of Lavinia as her Grace leant forward at the carriage-window to give the note and card to Mark. The reader may imagine the Queen's astonishment when her faithful major-domo entered with that card and that billet. Mark himself perceived the amazement of his mistress: but that expression of surprise quickly passed away from Indora's countenance; and she said to Mark, "You can introduce her Grace hither."

Indora knew perfectly well that Lavinia was a lady of stainless reputation, noted for her amiable and excellent qualities, and whose character afforded a striking contrast with that of her ducal husband. She had therefore granted the audience after a very brief hesitation: but during the few minutes which elapsed until the Duchess of Marchmont was introduced, Indora was engaged in a thousand conjectures as to what the object of this visit could possibly mean.

Lavinia was introduced; and Indora rose to receive her. Mark at once retired: the Queen and the Duchess were now alone together: but the latter knew not that it was a lady of Sovereign rank in whose presence she thus found herself. The very first glances which they threw upon one another produced mutually favourable impressions. The extraordinary beauty of the Queen struck Lavinia with astonishment as well as with admiration: while the modestly-dignified demeanour, and feminine air of self-confidence—frank, open, lofty, and yet utterly exempt from boldness—which characterised her Majesty, at once proclaimed the high-minded, well-principled, pure-hearted woman. On the other hand, the more soft and winning beauty of Lavinia—the pensiveness which habitually rested in her large blue eyes—and the half-entreating air with which she bestowed the salutations of courtesy upon Indora, at once riveted the interest of that Eastern lady.

They sate down together; and the Duchess began by apologizing for the intrusion of such a visit on the part of a perfect stranger. She spoke in the low fluid tremulous voice which indicated a distressed and suspenseful state of mind,—while her looks softly but eloquently implored the Queen's consideration and forbearance.

"Your Grace need offer no apology," replied Indora; "for by the tenour of your note, brief though its contents be, I am led to conjecture that some business of importance has procured me the honour of this visit?"

"It is indeed of great importance to myself—and—and—to *another!*" responded Lavinia tremulously. "But first let me ask how fares it with your servant?"—and here the voice of the Duchess quivered and faltered more and more: "for I have read that paragraph in the newspaper."

"My servant lies in a very dangerous condition. She is totally unconscious: but still the medical attendant gives hope of her eventual recovery:"—and as Indora thus spoke, she fixed her dark eyes earnestly upon the Duchess as if to fathom the motives of this visit.

"My present proceeding must have already appeared most singular," continued Lavinia, scarcely knowing how to approach the subject which she had to explain; "and perhaps when my purpose is made known, it may appear more singular still ——But, Oh, madam! whatever cause of offence my husband may have given you, I beseech your ladyship to pardon him!"

Again did Indora fix her eyes upon the Duchess: for she was full of wonderment as to the extent of the revelations which the Duke might have made to his wife, and to what topics such revelations might refer. Lavinia suspected what was passing in the Queen's mind; and she hastened to say, "Of those causes of offence I am utterly ignorant, Lady Indora. All that the Duke has told me, is that he has offended you—that you have the power to injure him—that you *are* exercising this power——And, Oh! he is very, very unhappy! But he implores your forbearance—he beseeches you to accept the assurance of his contrition; he would have come to you if he had dared—but on his behalf do I kneel at your feet!"

And with these words, Lavinia sank down to a suppliant posture,—taking Indora's hand and pressing it with the warmth of entreaty, while she looked up with imploring gaze into Indora's countenance. The Queen was profoundly touched by the pathos of this appeal: she saw in a moment that the Duke was making a blind and uninformed instrument of his wife——and she pitied her.

"Rise, madam," she said: "it is not for you to kneel at my feet: although——But rise, I conjure you! Oh, now you weep, Duchess of Marchmont!—and I cannot bear to behold these tears!"

"Lady, you are all goodness," murmured Lavinia: "yes, I read your character in your countenance! You will not be stern and unrelenting! Of whatsoever offences my husband may be guilty—and I seek not to know them——"

"Madam, rest assured," interrupted the Queen, with a true queenly dignity, "that my honour has suffered not——"

"No, no, lady!" cried the Duchess: "purity and virtue are stamped upon your countenance: they are delineated in your looks! Good heavens! not for a moment would I insult you with such a suspicion. I am entirely at your mercy—I place myself in your hands. If you think fit to narrate the offences of my husband towards you in order to convince me of the magnitude of your generosity in pardoning them, I shall listen: but if on the other hand you will spare me that which my own heart tells me cannot be otherwise than painful—and if you will pardon him all the same—Oh! I shall bless you—I shall love you as my benefactress!"

"Rise, lady—rise, Duchess of Marchmont!" said Indora, in a tremulous voice, and at the same time wiping away a tear. "You have given me no offence—you come in the candour and frankness of your own innocence—you must not kneel as a suppliant——"

"Lady—dear lady—I will kneel," continued the Duchess, "until you grant me this boon. Oh, you know not how much depends upon it! I saw my husband wretched and unhappy: I implored his confidence. He told me that he had enemies—and that you were one. He bade me come to you—and I am here! Grant him your pardon, dear lady—and he will give me back his love as a reward for procuring that forgiveness. You see how much is at stake! It is in your power to restore me that happiness which for years I have lost. Do this, dear lady, and I will love you as a sister! Ah, you weep! you are moved—you will accede to my prayer!"

"Rise, Duchess of Marchmont," again said Indora, but now speaking in a voice which was all tremulous with emotions. "Return to your husband—tell him that for all he has ever done towards me, I forgive him for your sake."

"Dearest, dearest lady!" ejaculated the Duchess, pressing Indora's hand to her lips, and then starting up from her suppliant posture; "you have poured joy into my heart—you have already filled my soul with happiness——"

"But understand me well, madam," interrupted the Queen; "I forgive your husband for whatsoever he may have done towards *myself*. Be particular in conveying my decision in the very terms wherein I express it."

"But what means this reservation?" asked Lavinia, her beautiful countenance suddenly becoming so pensively mournful that it went to Indora's heart to be unable to give her such an assurance as would send her away completely happy. "There is something in your words which I cannot understand: there is, as I have expressed it, a reservation——"

"Your husband will comprehend my meaning," answered Indora; "and he will at least thank your Grace for what you have done. Return to him, and say those words—that for his offences against myself I forgive him for *your* sake. Fail not to say that it is for *your* sake!"

"Ah, I comprehend!" exclaimed the Duchess, apparently awakening from the stupor of bewilderment: "there is some one else in whom you are interested, and against whom my husband has offended! Oh, is it possible? can it be really true that——"

Lavinia stopped short, and sank upon the sofa, overpowered by her feelings. Against whom could her husband have thus offended, if not against Sagoonah? For must not Indora be interested on behalf of her servant? and was it not on this account that she was making such a mental reservation? And now, too, the Queen looked distressed; for she failed not to fathom what was passing in the mind of the Duchess: she comprehended full well the nature of the suspicion which Lavinia entertained.

"Return to the Duke, madam," said the Queen, in a tremulous voice; "return to him, and deliver the message which you have already received from my lips."

The Duchess would have said more: she would have renewed her entreaties—she would again have fallen at the Queen's feet: but her emotions were too strong for the power of utterance—and she remained riveted like a statue to the spot. One last effort did she make to give vent to an impassioned intercession: but she could not—she dared stay no longer—and abruptly pressing the Queen's hand, she hastened from the apartment. When again seated in her carriage, Lavinia threw herself back and burst into an agony of tears: for she could no longer doubt that her own husband was in some unaccountable way connected with the assassin-attempt upon Sagoonah.

Nevertheless, as the reader may have perhaps already imagined, the mental reservation made by Indora referred not to Sagoonah——but unto *another!*

CHAPTER CXLIV.

THE PASTILLES.

We must now return to the Burker, whom we left when issuing forth from the Duke of Marchmont's

mansion with a purse which by the feel he knew to be well filled with notes and gold. Making his way to some low public-house with which he was acquainted—but where at the same time he felt very sure that he should not be recognised in his Jewish garb—the miscreant regaled himself with plenty of refreshment in the shape of strong liquor —having partaken of which, he retired to bed. It was his purpose to leave the metropolis on the following day, and get to some seaport, whence he might embark for France. We need hardly observe that he took very good care to reckon over the contents of the purse; and he found that the Duke of Marchmont had not deceived him; but that the amount was larger than the recompense promised for the crime in respect to Indora.

In the morning the Burker obtained an early sight of the newspaper; and he read the same paragraph which has already been presented to our readers. Nothing could exceed the astonishment of the Burker on finding how tremendous a mistake he had committed: he sate for some minutes utterly lost in amazement at the discovery of this startling fact. Yet how did it matter to him since he had pocketed the reward? But then a thought was gradually stealing into the Burker's mind. It was the death of Indora for which the Duke had bargained; and the same motives, whatever they were, which had prompted his Grace to desire that lady's assassination, must still exist. Thus did Mr. Barnes reason within himself; and thence he calculated that another reward as ample as the one he had just received might possibly be forthcoming from the Duke for the consummation of that crime. Greedy of gold as he was unscrupulous in conduct, he seriously reflected whether it would not be worth his while to remain in London until the night—obtain an interview with the Duke—and ascertain his views on the subject. Barney was of dauntless courage in pursuing his career of crime; and his many adventures of the last few months—his escapes, which he termed his "triumphs"—together with the success which had hitherto attended the assumption of his disguises, had tended to embolden him to an almost reckless extent. His mind was therefore made up: he would remain in London until the night at all events; and if the Duke acceded to his proposal, he would undertake the new venture—or rather, we should say, the fearfully correct perpetration of the one originally confided to him.

It by no means suited the Burker's disposition to remain in-doors all day at the public-house; and moreover such a circumstance in itself would look suspicious. He felt convinced that he was disguised in a style impenetrable to the eyes of the detectives; and there was a sort of thrilling pleasure in thus setting their keenness at naught. He therefore issued forth; but speedily becoming wearied of wandering about, he bethought himself of an expedient which promised some little amusement, and which at the same time would enable him to sit down and rest for hours on some convenient spot. The idea was one which had been suggested during his conversation with Jack Smedley at the time he assumed the Jew's dress at that individual's lodgings;—and this idea was to procure a small tray and some pastilles. The articles were speedily purchased; and behold, at about two o'clock in the afternoon, the Burker settled himself on the door-steps of an empty house in one of the thoroughfares at the West End of the town.

While there stationed, Barney the Burker reflected upon many things—and amongst others, upon his most recent proceedings in respect to Jack Smedley.

"Jack's a nasty cowardly dog," said the Burker to himself; "or else he wouldn't have played me such a scampish trick as that,—getting hold of my blunt and bolting off like a shot! But I was even with him though: I precious soon made the scoundrel disgorge, *as the sayin' is*. Nevertheless, he is a dirty rascal; and if he could have his revenge, he would be sure to take it fast enough. But one thing is certain: he wouldn't go and give hisself up merely to have the pleasure of informing agin me; and it's unkimmon sure that he couldn't inform against me unless he *did* give hisself up. So all things considered, I don't think there's no harm to be afeerd on in that there quarter."

Mr. Barnes had arrived at this satisfactory conclusion, when on raising his eyes, whom should he behold crossing the street and advancing towards him, but old Jonathan Carnabie? The sexton of Woodbridge did not look by any means the better for his debauch of the night but one previously: on the contrary, he was pale and ill, and seemed as if he had arisen from a bed of sickness. The fact was that the stupefying drug used by the Burker, had produced a very injurious effect on the sexton.

"By jingo, I'm done for!" said the Burker to himself, as Jonathan advanced straight towards him: "he'll twig me through this cussed black gaberdine and this thunderin' grey beard——But I'm a fool! Old Jonathan's eyes isn't half so sharp as the detective chaps' wisual organs; and *they* can't see through me no more than if I was one of them postesses. I'll look as serious as if I'd just come out of the sinnygog."

"How do you sell your pastilles, my good old man?" inquired the sexton of Woodbridge, fumbling at the bottom of his pockets for a few halfpence.

The Burker answered the question very curtly indeed, but imitating the Jewish accent as much as he could; for he had not forgotten the conversation he had overheard at the public-house on the preceding night, when it was stated that Jonathan Carnabie had been struck by his "lingo" at the time he was beguiling him with tales of his respectability.

"Well, I'll buy a few pastilles," said Jonathan: "for my landlady seems to be very fond of them—and as she is exceedingly kind and civil, I must make her a little present."

The Burker received the copper coins—gave the suitable number of pastilles—and eyeing the old sexton askance, hoped that he would at once take himself off. But it was not so. Jonathan possessed an inquiring disposition: and he thought that as he had come to London, it was his duty to make himself acquainted with every matter on which he was previously uninformed, and however trivial its interest.

"I never saw pastilles before I came to this great city," he said. "How are they made?"

"Chalk," was the curt response.

"Chalk? indeed!" said Mr. Carnabie. "What! black chalk? I never heard of it before."

"Charcoal, then," growled the Burker, inwardly venting a bitter imprecation against the old sexton's visual organs and limbs.

"Ah! charcoal, eh? And how are they scented?"

"Don't know!" rejoined the Burker.

Old Jonathan—suspecting not for a single instant who it was that stood thus disguised before him—said in a somewhat angry tone, "Well, at all events you might give a person a civil answer—particularly when he has laid out money with you."

But the Burker vouchsafed no response; and Jonathan walked away, muttering something sulkily between his teeth.

"He didn't know me—he didn't suspect nuffin!" thought the Burker chucklingly to himself. "The old rascal! I thought at one moment his eyes was a piercing like needles through this here gaberdine and beard. Howsomever——"

At this moment the Burker beheld the Duke of Marchmont advancing on foot along the street. His Grace had just come from assisting at the installation of Mrs. Oxenden in a splendidly furnished house which he had taken for her reception; and he was gratified on finding that such was her love of pleasure and of gold, she would be sure to keep ten thousand secrets relative to as many crimes, if it only suited her selfish purposes. Such was the impression he had formed of her during an hour's conversation; and he felt himself safe enough in that quarter. But was he so in other respects? His wife had faithfully reported the particulars and the issue of her interview with Indora; and therefore if he were satisfied in respect to Mrs. Oxenden, he was full of apprehensions in respect to the Oriental lady.

"She will forgive me all that I have done towards *herself*!" the Duke kept thinking within his own mind as he slowly paced along: "but this means that she will not or cannot forgive me in respect to what I have done towards others in whom she is interested. And all things considered in whom can she be so interested as in *him* who is assuredly alive—who is in England—and whom I have seen? Yes—they must be well acquainted—it is only too evident; and her visit to Oaklands was a trick—a stratagem, devised on his behalf—doubtless suggested by him too! It is this eastern woman only whom I fear: it is Indora only whom I apprehend. Were she out of the way, *he* would become powerless: he dares not come forward—he is compelled to work through the means of an agent. Yes—if Indora were put out of my path, I should feel myself safe——I might defy the whole world!"

Here the Duke of Marchmont suddenly stopped short, not only in his musings but likewise in his walk: for on raising his eyes, whom should he behold at the distance of a dozen yards but Barney the Burker? The Duke could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses: and yet it was so. There stood Barney dressed in the Jewish costume, with his tray of pastilles in his hand.

"This fellow is mad, to remain thus in London!" thought the Duke within himself: but the next instant a feeling of joy shot through his heart.

Drawing out his purse, and keeping it in his hand, so as to have the appearance of being about to bestow alms on the seeming Jewish mendicant, the Duke accosted him. There were very few people passing by at the time: and not a policeman was in sight.

"What are you doing here?" inquired Marchmont, in a hurried manner and in a low voice, as he still kept playing with his purse for appearance' sake.

"A sellin' of these werry pretty little things at a werry moderate rate," responded the Burker. "But jokin' apart, my lord—I was only a killin' time until evening should draw in—when I meant to take some steps to get an interview with your Grace."

"What for?" demanded the Duke hastily.

"Only, my lord," was the reply, "because the business wasn't done proper last night—though, by jingo! it wasn't my fault: for if that cussed young woman chose to tog herself out in her missus's dress, how the deuce was I to know anythink about it? She had a weil down over her face——"

"Yes, yes—I have read all about it," interrupted the Duke; "and I see full well that it was a mistake on your part. I do not blame you——"

"And that there mistake," rejoined the Burker, "can be put all right and straight; and the proper goose can be cooked if your lordship chooses to say the word."

"Meet me this evening in the lane at the back of my stables," said the Duke hurriedly: and then, with an appearance of ostentation for the behoof of the passers-by, he flung a shilling into the Burker's tray.

"There! I knowed how it would be," thought Barney to himself: "these here aristocratic chaps always will have their way when they once takes it into their head; and as it suits my lord's purpose that the Lady Indoors is to have her hash settled, settled it will be! But, by jingo! here's that old scoundrel again!"

This mental ejaculation bore reference to old Jonathan Carnabie, who was returning down the street; and for an instant the Burker thought of pitching away his stock-in-trade and taking to his heels. But now there were several persons passing at the moment; and such a proceeding would naturally excite suspicion that there was something wrong: whereas in respect to Jonathan it might be a false alarm after all. The Burker's gaze swept rapidly up and down the street: no policeman was in sight—no one who at all answered to his tolerably accurate notion or knowledge of a detective. Therefore the Burker remained at his post—but inwardly resolving to decamp the instant Jonathan Carnabie should be again out of sight. It must be admitted that he now cursed the unnecessary folly which had exposed him to such perils; and his mind was by no means reassured when he beheld the sexton of Woodbridge making straight towards him. But as he drew near, the Burker saw that he had a pleasant and agreeable expression of countenance; and he said within himself, "I wonder what the old dog wants now?"

"I will buy a few more of your pastilles," said Jonathan. "My landlady tells me that they are exceedingly cheap, and also very good."

"How many?" asked the Burker, in a feigned voice, and at the same time imitating as well as he was able the accents of a Jew of the lower order.

Jonathan stated the number he required, and drew forth the price. The Burker pocketed the money, still eyeing the old sexton askance: but there was really nothing in Jonathan's looks to warrant his apprehension. But we must leave these two individuals for a few minutes thus standing together, while we relate some particulars which are essential to the progress of our story.

As the reader has seen, rewards had been offered for the apprehension of the Smedleys and the Burker; and we may add that no efforts had been left untried by the police to get upon the track of either or all of these individuals. The horrible revelations made by the subterranean of the goldbeater's house in Lambeth, had excited the public feeling to a high degree; and the officers of justice therefore considered it absolutely necessary that the miscreants should be hunted down and brought to the bar of a criminal tribunal. But if in such a case it were desirable to capture a particular one rather than the others, this one was the Burker. His complicity in the hideous murder of the lawyer Pollard at Liverpool—his escape from the gaol in that town—and his daring, desperate conduct towards the police-officials at the Smedleys' house, were motives in addition to all others which rendered it absolutely necessary for the security of society that such a diabolic fiend should be cut short in his iniquitous career. But, as we have seen, the Burker as well as the Smedleys had hitherto evaded the pursuit of justice.

The Secretary for the Home Department, acting upon the representations of the police authorities, determined to take a step which it was hoped would have the effect of bringing the gang of miscreants within the range of the law's operation. Handbills were accordingly printed, proclaiming that the mercy of the Crown would be to a certain degree extended to any one of the gang (the Burker himself excepted) who would give such information as should place the others in the hands of the police; or the same benefits would be extended to that one of the said gang who would surrender up the Burker alone to the authorities. These bills were printed early on the morning of which we have been writing; and they began to be circulated in the metropolis at the time the Burker took his station at the West End, disguised as a Jew, and with his tray of pastilles before him.

The police-officers were active in scattering the bills amidst the low quarters of London,—knowing that in these districts they were far more likely to have the effect of attaining their object than in the superior districts of the metropolis. It happened that one of the first of these printed proclamations that were issued, fell into the hands of Jack Smedley, as in some new disguise he was wandering through the district of St. Luke's in as wretched a state of mind as can be well conceived. On reading the handbill, the gold-beater was at once smitten with the thought of availing himself of the benefit which it held out. He understood its meaning full well: it signified that whoever would turn round upon his accomplices should experience the mercy of the Crown so far as to have his life spared, though with the certainty of sustaining the application of the next degree of punishment,—namely, transportation for the rest of his days.

Jack Smedley was, as the reader has seen, a veritable coward in most respects — although having hardihood sufficient to plunge into crime when led on, encouraged, and assisted by others. But the idea of the gibbet was for him fraught with such terrors that it was a matter of surprise it had not restrained him from crime altogether: —unless indeed we must take into account the circumstance that every man when committing a deed of turpitude, hugs the belief that it will never be discovered. And now, upon reading this proclamation, Jack Smedley beheld the means of saving his life—Aye! and not only of saving his life, but also of revenging himself on the Burker for the last event which had marked their intercourse. What to Smedley was transportation for the remainder of his existence, if he could only save that existence from a horrible and ignominious fate? To have the power of putting out from his imagination that dark sinister object which was looming before his mental vision—to escape from the haunting influence of the sombre gallows and all the dread paraphernalia of death, —this were indeed happiness, although at the same time he should be doomed to fix his eyes on the far-off regions of eternal exile! Not many moments did the gold-beater waste in deliberation: his mind was speedily made up; and with the proclamation in his hand, he set out on his search after Barney the Burker.

We have said that he was wearing a new sort of disguise: but it is not worth while to pause and describe its details. Suffice it to say, that profiting by the hints which he had received from the Burker the evening but one previous, he had made such alterations in his appearance as were indeed well calculated to defy the scrutiny of the most lynx-eyed detective. Accordingly, he made his way through the streets of London, without exciting any suspicion, and without attracting towards himself a single suspicious look on the part of any constable whom he encountered. He knew enough of the Burker's desperate character to be well aware that if he were still in the metropolis, he was just as likely to be haunting one of the best neighbourhoods as to be lurking about in one of the worst.

"He is pretty sure," thought Jack Smedley within himself, "to keep on that old Hebrew disguise: for he knows it to be the best he could possibly have; and notwithstanding what took place betwixt him and me, he can't for a moment fancy that I should think of betraying him. Therefore it isn't on my account he would leave London. Besides, didn't he tell me that he had got a little business in hand which would keep him here for a few days?—and Barney is not the man to make himself scarce before his work is done. Depend upon it he *is* in London!—and if so, I will have him. My own life depends upon it! Aye —and for that matter, I would give up Bab likewise——Anything to save myself from swinging on the gallows! Besides, hasn't Bab led me a precious life—always teasing and tormenting me —calling me a coward—domineering over me—making me do exactly what she chose—ordering me about as if I was her slave? Yes, yes!—I have no compunction now: my own safety is all that I have to think of!"

Such were the thoughts which passed through Jack Smedley's mind as he wandered about the streets of London searching for the Burker. At length, while making his way through a quarter at the West End, just as he reached the top of a street into which he was about to turn, he caught sight of a dress the aspect of which instantaneously sent a thrill of joy through his heart. It was assuredly the Burker!—there could be no mistake! The beard—the hat—the gaberdine,—all were the same!—and then, too, he was evidently selling pastilles; and in his discourse with Smedley at the lodgings of the latter, he had with coarse jocularity declared that it only required this addition to the circumstances of his disguise in order to render that disguise complete.

Jack Smedley literally trembled with the feelings that now agitated him. The safety of his own life appeared to be within his reach:—but what if the Burker should still escape him? He flung his glances hurriedly up and down the street: not a policeman was to be seen. He looked again towards the Burker; and he now beheld him in discourse with a strange-looking old man, whom our readers will recognise as Jonathan Carnabie. Again did the gold-beater fling his glances around: but still no policeman!—and he did not dare leave the spot—he did not dare lose sight of Barney the Burker for even a single minute, lest that minute should be sufficient to enable him to vanish altogether.

Jonathan Carnabie had now finished his second bargain with the Burker, and was moving away: he was coming in the direction of that extremity of the street where Jack Smedley posted himself. But, ah! the Burker was retreating in the opposite direction. The gold-beater's first impulse was to give the alarm—to cry "Stop thief!" and thus set numbers upon his track. But a second thought convinced him of the impolicy of this proceeding. In the first place, the Burker might possibly escape: Smedley was not well acquainted with this particular quarter of the town, and he knew not what bye-streets might lead off from the main one along which Barney was now proceeding. And then again, it was just possible that it might not be Barney at all—but a veritable Hebrew who had happened to wear a costume precisely similar to that which Smedley had lent to his accomplice. All these considerations passed with lightning speed through the mind of the gold-beater; and for a few instants he was bewildered how to act. A thought however struck him; and he accosted Jonathan Carnabie.

"You were talking to that old Jew?" he said, with quick utterance.

"I was buying pastilles of him," responded the sexton, somewhat startled by this abrupt address from a total stranger.

"Did you see nothing queer in his look, sir?" demanded Jack—"nothing of a hang-dog expression of countenance?"

"Well, I did not take particular notice," replied Jonathan: "but now that you mention the circumstance——"

"Did he look like a Jew, sir?" exclaimed Jack Smedley. "But did you happen to notice whether there was a rent in the front part of his gaberdine—just about here?"—and the gold-beater indicated the left breast of his own coat.

"To be sure!" rejoined the old sexton: "I did observe it. But what——"

"It's all right, then!" ejaculated Smedley. "And now, sir, pray be good enough to hasten back after that Jew—just get him into conversation—do anything to engage his attention for a few minutes! He is an old scamp—the police are looking for him—but don't let him know that there is anything suspicious!"

"Dear me!" said Jonathan; "what a place this London is!"

"Pray be off, sir, and do as I ask you! You will have time to overtake him! There! he is stopping!—a woman is buying something of him! Be off with you, sir—and keep him engaged for a few minutes!"

Jonathan Carnabie accordingly retraced his way—while Jack Smedley, full of feverish suspense, again looked round in search of a policeman. Meanwhile the Burker, thankful at having got rid of the Woodbridge sexton, had been beating a retreat as fast as his assumed character of an old Jew would permit him to proceed; and he was near the extremity of the street when he was stopped by an elderly dame who began to bargain with him for some pastilles. The Burker inwardly vented his rage at being thus detained, by means of a bitter imprecation; and he gruffly bade the dame take as many pastilles as she chose and pay for them exactly what she liked. But she was a slow-going old creature: she counted a pile of pastilles with the utmost deliberation; and then she fumbled in her pocket for some halfpence to pay for the purchase. The Burker—who had plenty of money about him, and cared not one fig for the expected halfpence—was ready to burst with impatience: but he dared not even for an instant do aught that might create a suspicion. The old dame drew out a small packet of halfpence wrapped in a piece of paper; and as she deliberately opened this paper, the Burker's eye caught sight of the name of Smedley amongst the printed contents thereof. Then he beheld his own name; and the words "the mercy of the Crown" likewise met his view.

"Here, my poor old man—here's thrippence for you," said the dame; "and I'm sure I hope the money will do you as much good as if you was a Christian."

"Please to leave it wrapped up in the paper, ma'am," said the Burker: "it's rayther more conwenient to carry."

"Well, so it be," said the dame, who was disposed to be particularly loquacious. "I got the change just now in paying my weekly bill at the baker's. And what do you think? While I was a-standing quite promiscuous-like a-talking at the counter, in comes a policeman and pitches a packet of handbills; and he says, says he, 'I say, Mr. Oatcake, just distribute these amung your customers—mure partikler amung them as brings bakin's, because it's the poorer orders.'"

"To be sure ma'am!" said the Burker, growing desperately impatient. "Beg your pardon—but I've got a little appintment with our Rabbi at the sinnigog——"

"Oh! I won't detain you, my good man," continued the dame. "I was only going to say that when the policeman left the shop, Mr. Oatcake says, says he, 'These bills come in precious handy to wrap up halfpence.'"

"No doubt of it, ma'am!"—and the Burker, now unable to restrain his impatience any longer, snatched the handbill from her grasp and burst away from her.

"Well, I never did see a poor old Jew like that take such long strides before!" said the dame to herself, as she stood for some moments looking after the Burker. "But poor man! he's no doubt very particular in saying his prayers reglar, and is pretty nigh as good as a Christian after all."

Meanwhile the Burker was pursuing his way; and with the little handbill laid upon his tray, was reading its contents.

"Here's a pretty go!" he said to himself. "If the Government is a man of any feelin', he ought to be ashamed of hisself to try and bribe a fellow to turn round upon his pals."

At the same time it was with no very pleasurable sensations that Mr. Barnes perused the handbill: for he saw thereby that the authorities were terribly earnest in their pursuit of him. Moreover, his thoughts speedily riveted themselves upon Jack Smedley; and he said to himself, "It's high time I should hook it! The appintment with the Duke can't werry well be kept. I must show London a clean pair of heels afore I'm an hour older."

But at this moment he felt a tap upon his shoulder; and turning round with a start that made his unsold pastilles dance upon the tray, he beheld Jonathan Carnabie again. The Burker could scarcely restrain himself from knocking the old man down and then taking to his heels: but a glance towards the end of the street showed him that several persons were passing, and he dared not thus rashly thrust his head into the lion's mouth. It struck him that there was something singular in the old sexton's look; and then too, this third visit naturally filled the Burker's guilty mind with misgivings.

"I want a few more pastilles," said Jonathan: "they seem so good—and you are such a worthy man——"

"Cuss his eyes!" growled the Burker, who had the greatest difficulty in containing himself.

"What did you say?" asked Carnabie, looking up into the pretended Jew's countenance: and now—being already prepared to view him with suspicion, from all that Jack Smedley had said—Jonathan was at once struck with the peculiar expression of the Burker's eyes: so that he could not prevent himself from starting as the idea of the villain's identity flashed to his mind.

At that very instant a couple of policemen burst round the corner of a diverging street which was close by; and the Burker was seized upon at the moment that he beheld his recognition on the part of the old sexton.

"At last we have got you!" exclaimed one of the constables, with his staff in readiness to knock the miscreant down if he attempted resistance.

Barney struggled desperately,—giving vent at the same time to terrible imprecations: but the very gaberdine which served as his disguise encumbered him now—and he was quickly overpowered. It was some minutes before Jonathan Carnabie could recover from his astonishment at having thus learnt that beneath the garb of a venerable Jew was concealed the individual who had sought his life at Woodbridge, and who had so recently imposed upon him with such success in London. A cab was speedily called: the Burker was placed in it, and at once conveyed to Bow Street,—old Jonathan Carnabie following to listen to the proceedings, and to give his evidence, if needful.

We should observe that Jack Smedley, immediately after separating from the old sexton, had observed a policeman come sauntering round the corner of the street where he was posted; and he sped to accost him.

"Hasten!" said Jack: "there—in that direction—and arrest the old Jew. He is Barney the Burker!"

"The Burker?" ejaculated the constable. "Here's a capture! But I can't tackle him alone: he's the most desperate villain in all England. Will you come and help?"

"No—not I?" answered Jack, shrinking in horror from the idea of daring the deadly vengeance of his accomplice in the first moment of the desperado's fury at finding that he was betrayed.

"Well, where is he?" demanded the constable.

"Near the end of that street," was Jack Smedley's impatient answer.

"Then I'll nab him!" quickly rejoined the constable: "there's another officer close by!"

With these words the policeman turned upon his heel, and hastened into the street which ran parallel with that where the Burker was:—and procuring the assistance of a brother-official whom he encountered at a short distance, he and his comrade sped along a narrow street connecting the two above-mentioned. The capture was effected in the manner already described: and Smedley beheld it from under a gateway leading into a mews. He saw the cab arrive to bear Barney off to Bow Street; and thither Jack Smedley hastened on foot, in order to turn approver on behalf of the Government, that he might thereby save his own life.

Though it was now late in the afternoon, the magistrate was still sitting at Bow Street; and the Burker, dressed in his Jewish apparel, was placed in the dock. The news speedily spread throughout the neighbourhood that the formidable Barney was taken: and the court was in a very short time crowded to excess. One of the constables who had captured the criminal, deposed to the effect that he had been accosted by a stranger who gave him the information upon which he had acted. The Superintendent of Police for that district then called the magistrate's attention to the fact that the prisoner had escaped from Liverpool gaol, to which he had been some time back committed on a charge of murder; and the officer produced the placard published on the occasion, specifying the particulars of that escape and offering a reward for his re-apprehension.

"There are likewise, your worship," added the Superintendent, "grave and serious charges against this man arising out of certain discoveries made at a house in Lambeth, and which your worship doubtless bears in mind."

"It does not appear to me necessary to go into that matter," said the magistrate: "the course to be pursued in the present instance is clear enough. All that I have to do is to satisfy myself of the identity of the prisoner now in the dock with the one who escaped from the gaol at Liverpool; and to order his transfer to that town, that he may duly take his trial at the next Assizes holden for the Northern Circuit. What evidence, Mr. Superintendent, have you to establish this identity?"

"If the prisoner, your worship, was stripped of his disguise," responded the official thus addressed, "there are no doubt plenty of persons here who could identify him."

"Please your worship," said one of the constables who had captured the Burker, "I wanted to take off all that hair from his face: but he says it is stuck on so tight that it can only be removed by hot water—and there was not time——"

"You had better remove the prisoner for a few minutes," interrupted the magistrate, "and let the false hair be taken off."

"Please your worship," exclaimed a man who had just entered the court, and was now making his way through the crowd, "I can identify him as he is!—it was I who gave the information that caused his arrest!"

All eyes were turned upon the speaker: but it was not necessary for Barney to look at his countenance to see who he was: he had already recognised the voice—and a low but savage imprecation fell from his lips as he found that he was after all betrayed by Jack Smedley. The miscreant clenched his fist and ground his teeth with the deep concentrated rage that filled his soul: but he was impotent for purposes of mischief: otherwise he would have flown like a tiger at Smedley, to throttle or to tear him to pieces. There he was, however, powerless, and under complete restraint—shut up in the dock—manacles upon his wrists—a policeman on his right hand—a policeman on his left—and numerous other constables close by to seize upon him at the least demonstration of violence.

Jack Smedley ascended the witness-box; and having been sworn, he at once addressed the magistrate with a hasty and excited volubility.

"Please your worship, that man is Barney the Burker—and I can prove it! My name is John Smedley; and I claim the benefit of the promise held out in this hand-bill. I was the means of handing over the Burker to the constables; and I have now come to give myself into custody."

The announcement of Jack Smedley's name produced a considerable sensation in the court; for every one recognised it as that of the master of the house in Lambeth the hideous revelations of which had created so great an excitement throughout the metropolis.

"Don't believe a word, your worship, that is told you agin me," said the Burker, in a sort of half-dogged, half-submissive tone. "I'm a poor, honest Jew which gets his livin' in a respectable manner: and I can bring fifty witnesses to prove it. As for that there constable, I never said nothink of the sort about not being able to take off my beard without hot water. It's a nat'ral beard, your worship—and as fast on to my chin as your worship's whiskers is to your cheeks. And as for Jack Smedley, everybody knows he is a white-livered, sneakin' scoundrel——"

"It is rather singular," interjected the magistrate, "that if you are a respectable Jew you should have any such particular knowledge of the man Smedley. But we will soon ascertain whether your beard is false or not——"

"Now that I look close, I can see plain enough it is a false one, your worship," said the constable on the Burker's right hand: "and the moustachios too."

"I can identify him, your worship!" exclaimed another voice from amidst the crowd: and old Jonathan Carnabie now stepped into the witness-box.

His evidence was to the effect that he was sexton of the parish church of Woodbridge in Westmoreland—that he had engaged the Burker as an assistant, not knowing who he was at the time—that the fellow had intended to rob and murder him—but that his criminal design had been frustrated by the sudden arrival of assistance. Jonathan further stated that he had been hocussed and robbed by the Burker in London; and he excited some merriment in the Court by describing how he had purchased pastilles of the false Jew without for an instant suspecting that his old acquaintance the Burker was concealed beneath that disguise.

"Well, I tell you what, then," said Barney, who now began to think that it were better after all if he were to be transferred to Liverpool, inasmuch as the journey thither might possibly offer some facilities of escape; "I'm a considerate man in my way—and don't see the use of botherin' the justice. So I'll just admit for form's sake that I am the genelman which they say I be—Mr. Barnes, to wit. So there's an end of the matter."

"In that case," observed the magistrate, "I have nothing more to do than to direct that you, Mr. Superintendent, will take the necessary measures for conveying the prisoner to Liverpool. The clerk will make out the depositions of what has taken place, and you may start with your prisoner as soon as you think fit."

The Burker was now removed from the dock; and as the cells attached to the Court itself were considered to be stronger and more secure than those belonging to the station-house on the opposite side of Bow Street, the prisoner was consigned to one of the former. Jack Smedley was then placed in the dock; and on his own confession was committed to take his trial for the murder of an elderly person who passed by the name of Smith, and who was lodging at his house in Lambeth some time back. But he was given to understand by the magistrate that the promise held out by the Secretary of State would no doubt be fulfilled towards him. All these proceedings occupied the magistrate until nearly eight o'clock in the evening: so that the clerk of the court had no leisure to commence the depositions in the Burker's case until those in Jack Smedley's had been completed in order that the latter might be transferred to Horsemonger Lane Gaol.

CHAPTER CXV.

THE CELL.

It happened that at the time Barney the Burker was standing at the dock at Bow Street, the Duke of Marchmont was visiting Covent Garden Market, in order to purchase a handsome present of fruits and flowers as a present for Mrs. Oxenden, whom it was vitally important that he should conciliate by every means which suggested themselves—either by substantial bounties or by agreeable little attentions. While he was engaged in making those purchases, the rumour reached his ears that the notorious Burker had been arrested in a Jewish garb, and was then under examination at Bow Street. For an instant a cold terror seized upon the Duke of Marchmont: but the next moment he reflected that the prisoner would not scarcely for his own sake—and at least not in this early stage of the proceedings—confess to other crimes than that with which he was charged: for the same person who mentioned in the fruiterer's shop the circumstance of the Burker's capture, added that the magistrate was merely seeking to establish his identity in order to tranfer him to Liverpool.

The Duke, having paid for his purchases, and intimated to what address they were to be sent, issued from the market. He dismissed his carriage, which was waiting for him; and wandered for some little while about the adjacent streets, reflecting upon the course which it were expedient for him to pursue: for he felt how necessary it was that he should render the villain some kind of assistance if possible. At length his mind was made up; and he looked about him for a shop where articles of ironmongery were sold. He speedily found one; and entering it, made a variety of purchases, amounting to the value of several pounds. He ordered them to be sent to his mansion in Belgrave Square,—at the same time depositing his card upon the counter to indicate who he was. But while the shopman, having made many obsequious bows on reading the name upon the card, was making out the receipt, the Duke abstracted a file from the counter and concealed it in his pocket. As a matter of course this theft was not perpetrated for the miserable purpose of evading the payment of a few pence for the file: the large purchases which the Duke had made were merely a pretext for his visit to that shop—but it did not suit his purpose to include a file amongst those purchases. He therefore stealthily helped himself to one.

Issuing from the shop, the Duke returned into Covent Garden Market, in order to pick up whatsoever fresh information he could in respect to the proceedings at Bow Street; and he now learnt that the Burker, having admitted his name and identity, was under order of removal with the least possible delay to Liverpool. The Duke however found that another case—namely, that of Jack Smedley—was occupying the magistrate's attention, and that great crowds were collected in the court and in the street. He accordingly loitered about the neighbourhood until this case was terminated and the crowds had dispersed: he then repaired to the Bow Street police-office and inquired for the magistrate. But his worship had just taken his departure; and the Duke was referred to the Inspector.

On being conducted into the Inspector's room, the Duke of Marchmont gave his card, and at once experienced the most cringing civility.

"Being in Covent Garden Market," said his Grace, assuming a careless off-hand manner, "I happened to hear that a notorious criminal disguised as a Jew had been this afternoon arrested in a particular street at the West End of the town. Now, I have a strong reason for wishing to have a sight of this individual, if it be not in contravention of your rules or regulations."

"Certainly, my lord," answered the Inspector with a low bow; "you shall see the man. But might I ask——"

"Oh, yes! there is no secret in the matter," responded the Duke with a smile. "I was about to explain myself. The fact is——But, Ah! doubtless, now I bethink me, the prisoner's person was searched?"

"To be sure, my lord," replied the Inspector.

"Then you can tell me whether a diamond ring," continued the Duke, "was found about him —a ring set with a single diamond——"

"No, my lord," answered the Inspector. "A very considerable sum of money in notes and gold was found upon the prisoner—but nothing else of any value. May I ask why your Grace——"

"To be sure!" ejaculated the Duke, with an air of most condescending frankness: "a few words will suffice to explain the matter. I happened to be passing this afternoon through the very identical street where the pretended Jew was subsequently arrested; and believing him to be really what he seemed, I stopped to give him alms. For this purpose I took out my purse; and in so doing, drew off my glove. I bestowed some small coin upon him—and continued my way. Scarcely had I reached the end of the street, when I missed a diamond ring from my finger. I felt tolerably certain I must have unconsciously drawn it off along with my glove——"

"No doubt of it, my lord," observed the Inspector.

"I hastened back to the spot, where I found the seeming Jew still standing; and I asked him if he had observed a diamond ring lying in the street after I had left him? He answered in the negative: but it struck me at the time there was some confusion in the fellow's manner——"

"No doubt of it, my lord!" said the Inspector: "your Grace may depend upon it that the scoundrel found the ring."

"That is what I have come to ascertain," said the Duke. "But if it were not discovered upon his person——"

"Nevertheless, my lord, he has got it," interrupted the Inspector: "rest assured he has got it!"

"Got it!" said the Duke, affecting a bewildered air.

"To be sure, my lord!" rejoined the official. "Of course your Grace is ignorant of the tricks these scoundrels are up to: but there can be no doubt that he swallowed the ring."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Marchmont, now putting on a look of immense astonishment.

"Or else, perhaps," added the Inspector, "it is just possible that he may have so cleverly concealed it in some part of his dress, that it escaped the notice of the constable who searched him."

"As he is now in a position in which the ring can be of no possible use to him," continued the Duke, "he may perhaps be inclined to give it up to me—supposing your latter suggestion to be the true one, and that he has it concealed about his person. It is not for the value of the ring in a pecuniary sense—but it was given to me by a deceased relative——"

"I will go and speak to the prisoner, my lord," exclaimed the Inspector.

"Thank you—I shall feel grateful," said the Duke: and he suffered the Inspector to get as far as the door, ere he exclaimed, "But when I think of it, the villain is much less likely to acknowledge the fact to you than he is to me. Persons of his class invariably regard the functionaries of the law in the light of enemies whom they have a right to beffle and set at defiance to the utmost of their power."

"True, my lord," said the Inspector: "this is unfortunately too much the case."

"Well then, my lord," continued the Duke, "if I were to see the fellow, he might perhaps do for me that which he would not do for you."

"If your Grace has no objection to step across the street to the cell where he is confined: for I regret that I have not the power to order him to be brought here into your Grace's presence."

"Neither would I have you do such a thing," exclaimed the Duke. "I will accompany you."

The Inspector bowed; and Marchmont went with him across the street to the police-office. Procuring the keys from the gaoler—and taking a lantern, or bull's-eye, in his hand—the Inspector conducted the Duke of Marchmont to the back part of the premises, where a low door admitted them into a narrow little yard — or rather uncovered passage—whence the cells opened.

"Will your Grace speak to him through the wicket?" asked the Inspector in a whisper: "or will your lordship enter the cell?"

"Oh, with your permission I will enter it," replied the Duke: "for then he may possibly recognise me as having given him alms to-day."

"I am afraid, my lord," whispered the Inspector, "that if your Grace expects any display of gratitude on that account, you will be disappointed: for he is one of the most diabolical scoundrels as yet unhung."

"We can but try," responded Marchmont. "I suppose he is chained?"

"He is only manacled, my lord: he has got handcuffs upon him; and these we consider sufficient to ensure his safe custody—especially when your Grace is informed that the cells are of considerable strength."

Having thus spoken, the Inspector unlocked the door of the cell; and as he flung the light of the bull's-eye inside, the Burker was discovered sitting upon the wooden bench and reclining back in the angle of the walls. He still retained his disguise—with the exception of the wig, which had been taken off before he stood in the dock in the police-court: but the long grey beard and moustache continued affixed to the lower part of his countenance.

"Well, I say," growled the Burker, not immediately recognising the Duke of Marchmont, "are any of you chaps coming to bring me some hot water to get off this cursed beard? I know as how my face isn't a werry 'ansome one: but that's no reason why I should have to peel off all the skin and leave my chin as raw as a bit of bullock's liver."

"I will see that you have water presently," said the Inspector: "it has no doubt been forgotten in the hurry of businss. Here's a gentleman who wishes to speak to you."

"A genelman?" exclaimed the Burker. "Who the devil——"

"Lend me the lantern, Mr. Inspector, if you please," said the Duke, purposely speaking deliberately so that his voice might be recognised by the Burker,—who, his Grace knew full well, would be shrewd and cautious enough not to show any inconvenient sign of recognition.

Marchmont entered the cell with the bull's-eye; and for a moment holding it so that its light fell upon his own features, he darted upon the Burker a look which enjoined prudence and caution: so that Barney, at once taking the hint, and inwardly rejoiced at the presence of his Grace, considered that the best thing he could do was to remain silent and take his cue from the nobleman.

"Do you not recollect," continued Marchmont, "that I stopped and gave you a shilling to-day, when you were standing in the street?"

"Well, I think I do," replied the Burker.

"And you remember that I returned," continued his Grace, "and asked you something about a ring?"

"Well, I do recollect summut of that also," was the prisoner's response.

"And you deny having seen that ring which I dropped?"

"To be sure: cause why I didn't see it."

"I know you said so at the time," continued the Duke of Marchmont: "but I had my doubts then—and I have them still more strongly now. Come, my man, confess the truth. That ring is of no use to you——"

"Not a bit," replied the Burker.

"But it is much valued by me," proceeded Marchmont, "because it was a gift from a relative who is now no more. Situated as you are, unhappy man——"

"Yes—a devilish pretty sitivation it is," said the Burker. "Nice easy seat, this—pleasant airy cell—no smell of the drains—plenty of good grub—a bottle of the best wine—and a set of say-nothink-to-nobody kind of fellows that doesn't take you by the scruff of the neck and shove you along when they wants you to move from place to place."

"Come, none of your nonsense, now!" exclaimed the Inspector sharply, as he stood just behind the Duke.

"Oh! that's you, Mr. Jack-in-office—is it?" said the Burker.

"Pray do not irritate him," whispered the Duke hastily to the official. "I am sure he has got my ring; and I think I can do something with him:"—then again turning to the Burker, Marchmont said, "Come, my man, it will do you no good to deny the fact."

"Well, I'll tell you what it is," interrupted Barney, who was at no loss to conjecture that the Duke wanted to speak to him alone: "if so be as I've got summut to tell, I shan't tell it in the presence of that Jack-in-office. He's insulted me—he's wounded my feelin's in their most sensitive pint——"

"Mr. Inspector," whispered the Duke, now again hastily turning towards the official, "may I venture to beg that you will just step away from the threshold of the door?"

"To be sure, my lord," responded the officer, who was all obsequiousness. "I do really believe your Grace will manage the fellow yet; but if not, I will have his person searched once more."

"Meanwhile let me try what I can do," whispered Marchmont.

The Inspector instantaneously quitted the threshold of the open door, and began pacing to and fro in the little yard, purposely making his boots stamp heavily on the pavement, so as to convince the Burker that he was no longer listening.

"Come now, my good man," said the Duke, thus speaking in order to keep up appearances in case the Inspector should overhear what was passing, "you may as well give me up that ring; and if money is now of any service to you, I shall cheerfully pay for the restoration of a jewel on which I set so much value."

While thus speaking, the Duke of Marchmont produced the file—choosing a moment when the Inspector's footsteps sounded from the extremity of the little yard; and at the same time his Grace bent a significant look upon the Burker. The prisoner clutched that file—nodded knowingly—and thrust it into his waistcoat-pocket.

"Perhaps they will soon search you again?" hastily whispered the Duke: and then he at once exclaimed aloud, "This denial is ridiculous! I know you *must* have my ring."

"Of course he has," muttered the Inspector, who caught those words while turning round close by the door.

"No—they won't search me again," was the quick whisper which now came from the Burker's lips.

"I tell you that it is useless to persist in this denial," exclaimed the Duke: then taking a diamond ring from his pocket, he added in a low under-tone, "Give it up to me in a few minutes."

"I tell you I haven't got it!" vociferated the Burker as he received the ring and nodded significantly.

"But all appearances are against you, my man," rejoined the Duke: then again lowering his voice, he hastily added, "If you succeed in escaping, write to me—and I will send you more money:"—at the same time he thrust some compactly crushed up bank-notes into the miscreant's hand.

There was a further semblance of accusation and remonstrance on the part of the Duke, as well as of sturdy denial on that of the Burker,—until at length the nobleman, as if yielding to a fit of angry impatience, ejaculated, "It is no use, Mr. Inspector: I can do no good with this fellow."

"I was afraid not, my lord," observed the officer, now returning to the threshold of the door. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, to treat his lordship in this manner."

"His lordship?" ejaculated the Burker: "how did I know he was a lord? You said fust of all he was a genelman."

"It is no less a personage than his Grace the Duke of Marchmont," replied the Inspector ostentatiously.

"Well—a duke may do a poor devil some good," said the Burker: "so here goes! Just put your fingers, my lord, inside my veskit—right underneath this cussed old gaberdine; and there you'll find a slit in the linin'."

The Duke, handing the bull's-eye to the Inspector, advanced towards the prisoner, and affected to be fumbling amongst his garments in search of the place of concealment which had been described. But it was in reality from the waistcoat-pocket that he took the ring; and turning towards the Inspector, the nobleman displayed it with a look of joyous satisfaction.

"I congratulate your lordship," said the official, who was himself highly delighted with what he conceived to be the successful result of a proceeding at which he had materially assisted.

"Much as I am horrified at this man's character and crimes," said the Duke, "yet if there be any way in which I can temporarily ameliorate his condition while he is in this place——"

"There is nothing, my lord, which you can do in that respect," answered the Inspector. "He will be removed by the earliest mail-train tomorrow morning to Liverpool; and in this cell must he remain until the hour of departure."

"Well then, there is nothing I can do for him," observed the Duke: then turning to the Burker, he added, "Unhappy man, I hope you will repent of what you have done!"

Having thus expressed himself with a monstrous hypocrisy and dissimulation, the Duke of Marchmont issued from the cell.

"You shall have hot water almost immediately," said the Inspector, pausing for an instant ere he locked the door.

"Thank'ee," answered the Burker: "but it's too late now. I'd much rayther be left to go to sleep quietly, if so be I'm to start off so thundering early in the morning."

"But you require food before you go to sleep," said the Inspector.

"Not a mouthful—and not a drain," rejoined the prisoner gruffly. "Do you think a feller has got any stomach for grub when he is in such a precious plight as this? I wish you'd leave me to myself—undisturbed—to sleep away my bad thoughts: and then I shall thank you."

"Very well," answered the Inspector: "you shall not be disturbed:"—and he then locked the huge door of the cell.

As the Duke and the official issued forth into the street again, the latter said in a servile manner, "See, my lord, what it is to have a great title. If I hadn't happened to have told that fellow who your lordship is, he never would have given up the ring."

"And as I am indebted to you for so much civility and attention," responded Marchmont, "you must not feel it an insult if I proffer you some little token of my gratitude."

At the same time his lordship thrust a ten-pound note into the Inspector's hand: and then hurried away, as if for the purpose of cutting short the thanks which the recipient of this bounty began to proffer.

But let us return to the Burker. Scarcely had the door of the cell again closed upon him, when he gave a sort of bound upon his seat, as if to afford ebullition to his hitherto pent-up feelings of delight. Not only had he now in his possession a little instrument by the aid of which much might be done, and the important deed of an escape perhaps be effected: but he had likewise the assurance that the Duke of Marchmont was not abandoning him to his fate, but that he was interesting himself in him.

"So," said the Burker, thus continuing the train of his ideas, "if the worst comes to the worst and I don't get out of limbo now, but find myself cast for death at Liverpool, there's a nobby cove as will stand my friend; and I shouldn't wonder if he was to bring the case of Mr. Barnes Esquire afore the House of Lords, and say as how it would be a thundering shame to put so useful a genelman out of the way by making his neck acquainted with a thing that's only fit for a hoss or a hass—a halter to wit. Ah! it's a blessed good thing to have a Duke as one's pal: for somehow or another he's sure to get me safe out of this precious mess that I'm in. And if so be I do come off scot free, I'll hunt out that sneaking, snivelling rascal, Jack Smedley; and I'll have his life as sure as his name's what it is. Perhaps I shall go across the water at the country's expense —just as our great ambassadors travels for nothing —or as them dirty scamps of German Princes does when they comes over to visit their pals at Vindsor Castle or Buckingham Palace. And if I do go out in that there honourable manner to Wan Diemen's Land or Australia, so much the better for my resolve to wring that feller Jack Smedley's neck: cos why, he's certain to be lagged. And if I'm let free altogether through my friend the Duke—or if so be I escape to-night—blowed if I don't start off at my own expense—that is, at the Duke's—but it's just the same thing: and I'll never rest till I cook Jack Smedley's goose."

The Burker sometimes had a habit of musing as well as of talking in a strain that was horribly and ferociously humourous: and such was the mood that he found himself in now. A pitchy darkness prevailed in the cell: but if any eyes had been peering in upon that wretch, and if they could have penetrated the Cimmerian blackness of the place, it would have been seen that his countenance expressed a diabolic savageness while he was thus meditating his schemes of vengeance in respect to Jack Smedley.

The Burker felt the file; and by the touch he knew that it was one well suited to his purpose. He was tolerably well assured that he would not at least for the present be intruded upon, inasmuch as he reflected that whatsoever the Inspector had promised in the presence of the Duke of Marchmont, he was certain to perform. The reader can have been at no loss to comprehend the Burker's motive in declining to have hot water sent in wherewith to take off his beard, and likewise in refusing the refreshments which the Inspector had proffered. He wished to be left entirely to himself, so that with the least possible delay he might commence operations towards the achievement of his escape. It was really true, as he had stated to the constable, that he could not take off his false beard without the use of hot water: for the adhesive matter clung tight to the skin, which it would assuredly peel off if it were attempted to remove the beard by violence. And then, too, it must be observed that the Burker had not been shaven for two or three days; so that the false beard had a particularly powerful hold on the natural stubbly growth over all the lower part of his face.

Not many minutes elapsed after the Duke of Marchmont and the Inspector had quitted the cell, before the prisoner—now convinced that everything was again quiet—began to file away at one of the handcuffs. The operation of severing the iron was not a very long one, although he had to work somewhat at a disadvantage from the fact that his two hands were kept by the connecting chain inconveniently close together. But when one ring was thus sundered, and that hand was free, the other manacle was more expeditiously eaten through with the biting teeth of the file. Scarcely was this task accomplished, and just as the Burker was beginning to rub in gleefulness the hands that were thus liberated,—when he heard the door of the little yard open.

To slip his hands through the rings again—to conceal the file—to stretch himself upon the bench—and to begin to breathe with a heavy regularity as well as with a certain nasal sound,—all these were the work of a moment. But still the Burker was seized with dire alarm, lest any official should enter the dungeon to examine whether his handcuffs were all right. He heard heavy footsteps approaching: they stopped at the door of his cell; and then the trap was pushed open. The light of a bull's-eye was thrown through that trap into the cell; and it streamed full upon Barney's countenance. He affected to wake up slowly; and rubbing his eyes, growled forth, "What the devil did you do that for?—why can't you let a feller sleep?"

"I only wanted to see that you were all right," answered the constable, who was peeping through the trap.

"All right indeed!" responded the Burker, still in a growling tone. "I raythor think that I'm all wrong; and so you'd fancy too, my fine feller, if you was locked up in this cussed place. Why, it took me half-an-hour to compose myself to sleep on this hard plank; and now you've woke me up, it'll take me another blessed half-hour to go off again."

"I didn't mean to disturb you," answered the officer; "and that's the reason that I looked through the trap instead of opening the door."

"Well, you're a considerate genelman in your way," rejoined Barney, "but I don't think as how the tax-payers of this blessed country gives you chaps twenty bob a week a-piece to come waking up respectable people which is taking their natural rest. Howsomever, I forgive you for one: and so now good night."

Having thus spoken, the Burker turned round upon the hard bench again, and affected to be endeavouring to compose himself off to sleep. The constable closed the little trap-door; and immediately afterwards the Burker caught the sound of the yard-door shutting likewise. He started up from the bench; and off came the manacles again. His proceedings—at least the next proceeding which he had to adopt, was already settled in his mind. He knew these cells of old; and he was well acquainted with the features, the arrangements, and the position of all the adjacent buildings. There was no upper storey to the little structure containing the cells; the roof was immediately above his head; and in that quarter it was that he purposed—or at least hoped to be enabled to effect his egress.

The cell was tolerably high; and there was no moveable furniture in it which he could use to raise himself upon, or to make available as a standing-place. But in this respect his plan of proceeding was also settled: he had well weighed and pondered the point when filing at his handcuffs. In the first place, by the aid of the file he dislodged a brick in the wall at the height which suited his purpose and at about two feet distant from the corner or angle. Then he did the same with another brick in a corresponding position in the wall which united with the other one to form that angle. Working in the dark, these processes were far longer than they would have been if he had the benefit of light. His next step was to break off a portion of the wood which edged the hard plank-bed, or rather seat, on which he had reposed himself when the constable looked through the trap-door. He had so well calculated the length of the piece of wood which he could thus detach, in reference to the distance between the two holes left in the walls by the extraction of the bricks, that the stout fragment of timber exactly fitted into the apertures provided for its reception. The reader will therefore understand that this piece of wood formed the basis of a triangle of which the two walls were the sides and the angle of the wall was the apex: or, in more simple terms, the wood was a sort of hollow shelf stretching from wall to wall, at about two feet from the corner.

Standing upon this piece of wood, the Burker was enabled to commence operations upon that part of the roof which was immediately over his head; and aided by the file, he speedily forced a hole through the lath and plaster. With his hand he could feel the tiles; and he had now to dislodge them in such a way that they should not slide down the sloping roof and fall into the road—a circumstance which might lead to the frustration of his entire project of escape. Therefore, after having raised the first tile with the utmost caution, he drew in each successive one through the opening thus formed, and deposited it upon the floor of his cell. Though he worked with all his characteristic energy, yet was he in a continued state of suspense; for another visit on the part of a constable to the little trap in the door would prove the ruin of everything. This visit was not however paid; and thus the Burker worked on unmolested.

At length the opening was large enough for him to begin passing himself through it; and first protruding his head, he looked carefully around to see whether the coast was clear. No one was in the little yard—no one was looking forth from any of the numerous windows which, at the backs of the adjacent houses, commanded a view of the scene. At a short distance was the rear of the vast structure of Covent Garden Theatre; and as the Burker knew that the establishment was shut up at the time, a thought struck him.

"If I could only get into that place," he said within himself, "maybe I should have a choice of dresses; and whether I made my appearance in the streets as Harlequin or Pantaloon, it would at all events be a change from this cussed old black gaberdine and grey beard."

Having satisfied himself that he was unobserved, the Burker issued completely through the aperture which he had formed in the roof of his cell; and he now seemed to breathe the air of freedom. Gathering up the folds of his long garment in such a way that it might not encumber him nor impede his progress, he crept along a wall, and climbed to the top of the somewhat higher building than that from which he had escaped. Another connecting wall brought him to another flat-roofed house; and here he came to a stand-still. The place where he thus found himself, abutted against a much higher building, to reach the summit of which there was only one means visible—and this was to climb a slanting leaden pipe. To do this, or to retrace his way altogether to the roof of his cell and seek some other avenue of escape amidst the maze of buildings, —these were the alternatives between which he had to decide. With straining eyes he penetrated through the semi-obscurity which prevailed; and he thought he beheld sufficient to convince himself that the passage of the leaden pipe, however desperate the venture might be, was the course to be adopted.

The courage of the Burker has been before spoken of; and as his circumstances were desperate, this natural courage on his part was now enhanced to a degree which rendered him almost reckless. His resolve was therefore speedily taken. Again he gathered up the old Jewish gaberdine in such a way that it might not impede his progress; and then he entrusted himself to the slanting pipe, in the same spirit of venturesome desperation with which a ship-wrecked mariner clings to the plank which is the only barrier between himself and destruction. The reader will understand that this leaden pipe sloped up from the roof where the Burker had landed, to the roof of the higher house against which the former building abutted; and it thus ran diagonally as it were, or obliquely, along the back of that loftier structure. We may add that there was just a sufficient interval between the pipe and the brickwork to allow the adventurous fugitive to obtain a firm grasp upon it;—and now success depended upon two conditions—the first being whether he could maintain his balance, and the second whether the pipe itself would be strong enough to support him.

Firmly clutching the pipe with his hands, and cautiously using his lower limbs to sustain him in that perilous position, the Burker began crawling up the pipe: but there was a moment when his heart almost failed him as he looked down into the frightful abyss to which he would be hurled if his hands failed to retain their hold, or if the pipe itself should give way. But sternly compressing his lips, and bracing himself up with all his courage, the Burker pursued his path of danger, —suspended in mid-air, and looking like some colossal insect that was crawling up the back of the house. Several yards were accomplished,—when one of the dreaded chances against him appeared about to receive a horrible realization: for the pipe began to bend. So mortal a terror seized upon the Burker, notwithstanding the daring nature of his disposition, and notwithstanding the recklessness of his character, that for an instant he felt his hands relaxing from the tightness of their grasp: but then the next moment, quick as thought, they tightened upon the pipe with even a stronger tenacity than before—while his lower limbs grasped it convulsively.

But the pipe was bending! To retreat was impossible: there was no gliding nor sliding back from the position in which he had placed himself. On he must go at all risks and ventures:—on he must go though the next instant should see the pipe suddenly give way or break beneath him and plunge the wretch headlong into the abyss below. Fortune however seemed determined to favour him: the pipe bent, but did not break: hope grew stronger in his breast—and it was with a wild thrill of joy that he could at length say to himself he was safe. His right hand clutched the ledge of the parapet of the high building to which he had thus venturously and desperately clambered up: a few instants more, and he stood in safety on the flat roof of that building. Almost overcome by a sense of the danger from which he had escaped, and shuddering at the recollection of the hideous gulf which by means of a frail pipe he had thus bridged, the Burker threw himself flat upon his back on the leads to repose for a few instants ere he pursued his way. Precious though time were, yet the man could not help thus resting there for that brief space.

CHAPTER CXVI.

TWO FRIENDS.

A COUPLE of rooms on the second-floor of one of the houses on the same line with the Bow Street police-office, were inhabited by a middle-aged man of the name of Bealby. He was a short, thin, active, dapper-looking person,—with hair and whiskers that had once been of a vivid red, but which were now turning grey. He had very sharp, keen, piercing eyes; and the entire expression of his countenance indicated cunning and duplicity. He was dressed in a somewhat seedy suit of black; and his linen was not altogether of the cleanest.

The two rooms communicated with folding-doors, which stood open; and the place was most singularly crowded with articles which at the first glance might either be taken for an assemblage of archæological curiosities, or else for the contents of a property-room at a theatre. There were helmets, and shields, and weapons of all sorts—curious costumes—a Turkish turban surmounting the wooden framework on which a mandarin's robe was displayed—a Red Indian's tomahawk lying next to an old-fashioned English musket—and a whaling harpoon keeping company with a New Zealand bow and arrows. There were old pieces of china, statues, vases, and pictures—brickbats that were alleged to be part of a recently discovered Roman wall in some place or another—bowls and cups that were represented to have been dug out of Herculaneum and Pompeii—while a mummy in a glass-case appeared to be staring with eyeless sockets at a gigantic skeleton which grinned at it from the opposite wall. There were strange pieces of theatrical scenery too, and which a small label represented to have been used at the Royal Opera some little while back established by the King of the Sandwich Islands in his Majesty's capital;—and, in a word, the contents of these two rooms were of the most miscellaneous and no doubt of a very curious description.

By the light of a solitary candle in the front apartment, Mr. Bealby was drinking gin-and-water with a friend. This friend was many years younger than himself: indeed he was not more than five or six and twenty: but he had a sickly dissipated look, as if he were much better acquainted with the alcoholic mixture which he was now imbibing than with regular and wholesome meals. He was exceedingly shabby in his apparel; and by the state of his linen appeared to possess the confidence of his washerwoman to a much smaller degree than did even Mr. Bealby himself. This individual bore the surname of Limber; but amongst his friends and equals he was more familiarly known by the diminutive of his Christian name of Benjamin.

We should observe that Mr. Bealby had been out to pass the evening at a free-and-easy, where he had partaken of a chop and a baked potato—thereby, to use his own highly-expressive language, knocking dinner, tea, and supper, all into one. At this free-and-easy he had encountered Mr. Limber, who was an old acquaintance, but whom he had not seen for some few years. Remembering that he had a little credit at the public-house nearly facing his lodging in Bow Street, and that this credit was good to the extent of a bottle of gin and half-a-dozen cigars, Mr. Bealby invited his friend home to partake of those refreshments—observing "that as they had a great deal to say to each other, they might just as well quaff their blue-ruin and smoke their weeds at his rooms." Thither therefore they repaired from the free-and-easy: the gin and the cigars were procured from the public-house aforesaid; and it happened that just at the time the Burker was engaged in climbing up the pipe, Mr. Bealby and Mr. Limber were sitting down to enjoy themselves in the apartment of the former.

Mr. Limber was prepared by some little conversation during the walk from the free-and-easy, to find his friend's rooms crammed with strange objects; and therefore on entering these apartments, he was not so much astonished as he would have been if suddenly introduced thither without any previous information on the point. At the same time, being somewhat of a nervous temperament, Ben Limber liked the aspect of the mummy and the skeleton as little as possible; and he sate with his back towards those objects, while discussing the gin-and-water, the cigars, and things in general.

"Why, how long is it since you and I met, old fellow?" asked Bealby, when they had begun to make themselves comfortable.

"A matter of six or seven years," was the response. "I was just fresh upon town then—— green—uncommon green!—but I've picked up a bit or two of experience since."

"You was a lawyer's clerk then," said Bealby.

"Yes: but I devilish soon cut the law," replied Ben Limber, "and went upon the stage. I starred it a bit in the provinces as Mr. Sidney Howard Fitzplantagenet: but I soon got tired of that sort of business—and have been knocking about the world in various ways—till, betwixt you and me and the post I'm pretty near knocked down altogether."

"Well, we must see if we can't knock you up again," responded Bealby. "It will be a devilish hard thing if two clever chaps like you and me, can't put our heads together and do something good. You talked of your experiences: but they are nothing like mine! Why, my history would make such a book as never before was read!"

"Well, what have you been doing since you and I last met?" inquired Ben Limber.

"You should rather ask what I have *not* been doing," rejoined the other. "I've dabbled in everything. Let me see—what was I when you saw me last?"

"You had just gone through the Insolvents' Court, you know," answered Ben Limber, with a laugh: "and you was in high feather."

"Ah, to be sure!" observed Mr. Bealby: "I was getting up an Insurance Company at that time. I'll tell you how it was. I was three months in the Queen's Bench before I went with flowing canvass through the Court; and in the Bench I met half-a-dozen capital fellows, who agreed to join with me in starting the Insurance Company. So we soon had everything ready cut and dried; and we gave ourselves our respective situations. I was to be Resident Manager, with a salary of four hundred a year: another was to be Actuary: two others were to be Auditors: another was to be Vice-Chairman of the Board; and a lushing blade of a fellow was to be surgeon. So the moment we all got out, we set to work and established the concern. Splendid offices—Capital, two hundred thousand pounds!"

"The deuce!" ejaculated Ben Limber with a start of astonishment. "Where did you find your capitalists?"

"In imagination," answered Mr. Bealby, with a knowing look. "We issued the shares: it was not at all difficult—nothing to do but to have so many slips of paper neatly printed. We gave two or three hundred a-piece to ourselves, and five hundred to Lord Brummagem, who on that condition became the Chairman of the Board of Directors. I can assure you the whole affair was most splendidly managed: and for twelve months it went on swimmingly."

"You don't mean to say that you really issued any policies?" observed Mr. Limber.

"I mean to say," replied Bealby, "that we issued four or five hundred policies during those twelve months. The grand secret was that our medical examiner took every life that offered itself, no matter whether the applicant might be in the last stage of consumption."

"But when any one died?" said Mr. Limber inquiringly.

"Fraud, my dear fellow—fraud!" responded Mr. Bealby: "that was our invariable answer. The Company had been imposed upon—the insurer had kept back certain facts: he had admitted that he spat blood and had a continuous hacking cough, but he had withheld the important fact that he experienced an incessant pain in his great toe. Bless you! deaths came tumbling in at a frightful rate, because we ensured everybody, and we gave a per centage to our agents on every policy they brought in, so that they were interested in getting as many as possible, without the slightest reference to the value of the lives. The game would have lasted well enough, had it not been that a cursed weekly newspaper began to attack us: the bombardment was continuous and irresistible: so we fell to pieces. There was an end of the Universal Assurance Company for all Christendom."

"And what did you do next?" inquired Mr. Limber.

"I advertised an income of four pounds a week for everybody who would send me five shillings' worth of postage stamps. That was my next dodge," added Mr. Bealby, as he complacently whiffed his cigar.

"I don't quite understand it," observed his friend dubiously.

"Quite intelligible, my dear fellow!" said Mr. Bealby. "I inserted an advertisement in a newspaper offering to instruct any one who sent me five shillings' worth of postage stamps, in the way of making three or four pounds a week. On receiving the stamps, I sent half-a-dozen practical receipts,—one for making cheap ginger-beer—another for soda-powders—a third for pomatum—a fourth for a dentifrice—a fifth for an anti-bilious pill—a sixth for a cosmetic—and so on. Now observe! The advertisement cost me seven-and-sixpence—it brought me twenty letters containing the stamps—that was five pounds: deduct the expenses for advertisement, the little printed slips of receipts, the stationary and postage for replies—and I had at least four pounds eight to put into my own pocket."

"That was a lucrative thing," observed Ben Limber. "Why did you give it up?"

"It gave me up," answered Bealby: "it wore itself out. A number of other fellows imitated the trick: they cheapened the thing—they only asked for a shilling's worth of stamps: and so it soon ceased to be worth while to carry on the business at all."

"Well, what did you do next?" inquired Limber.

"I opened a servants' bazaar," responded Bealby.

"But how the deuce did you make a connexion amongst servants?" exclaimed Limber.

"I never did make any. I charged half-a-crown for registering each name in my book; and, you see, it was all clear profit."

"Well, but those who paid, expected recommendations to places?"

"Yes—and they got them too. I copied the addresses of persons advertising in the morning papers for domestics; and that was the way I managed."

"But the thing could scarcely last," said Limber.

"No more it did," replied Bealby, with a smile: "or else I should be carrying it on now. I was rather too fond of some of the pretty servant-girls that came to pay their fees; and betwixt you and me, Ben, the concern was suddenly broken up by an unpleasant little incident which occurred."

"How so?" asked Limber.

"The fact is, I was had up before the magistrate on an accusation of trying to snatch a kiss from a certain pair of red lips: an investigation followed—the way in which the business was transacted was brought to light—and while passing a month at the House of Correction on account of the kissing affair, I had ample leisure to reflect on what should be the new dodge."

"And what did you do then?" asked Ben Limber.

"I came out of prison in such precious bad plight," responded Mr. Bealby, "that I was scarcely fit for anything except to make myself a victim."

"A victim!" ejaculated Ben. "A victim of what?"

"A victim of religious persecution," answered Mr. Bealby. "Don't you see, I was a tradesman from the north of England who had been distrained upon for Church-rates; and resisting the claim upon principle, was made a martyr to the cause. I had come up to London to get some Member to present a petition to Parliament on my behalf; but being reduced to distress, was obliged to apply to the sitting magistrate at one of the police-courts—taking very good care, however, not to address myself to the worshipful gentleman who had committed me in the kissing case. Well, my story was believed: I had ten shillings given me from the poor-box; and the next day the case was in all the papers. 'Respectable man'—'distressed and careworn appearance'—and all that sort of thing. It told admirably; and subscriptions poured in. 'A.B.C.' sent two pounds; 'A Lady' five pounds; 'the Earl of X' ten pounds; 'A Dissenter' one guinea; and so forth. An elderly Quaker ferreted me out and took me to his house. I received the first subscriptions from the magistrate: they still kept pouring in—but I never got any more; for his worship in the meantime had written to the north, and had learnt that my tale was a pure fabrication. The Quaker resented a little familiarity of which I was guilty towards his pretty demure-looking daughter, from whose lips I sought a kiss; and so, all things considered, I was compelled to beat a retreat into another neighbourhood."

"And what did you do then?" inquired Ben Limber.

"I could not immediately settle my mind to anything," answered Mr. Bealby; "and so the money slipped away before I was well-prepared with a scheme for making more. At last, driven by necessity, I took to penny-a-lining for a sporting newspaper. It was hard work enough: but I got a good insight into turf-matters—though I did not much relish the vocation. I was thinking of giving up the newspaper—when a vacancy for a Prophet suddenly occurred."

"A Prophet?" ejaculated Ben Limber, his eyes staring wide with astonishment.

"Yes—to be sure!" said his friend coolly—"a Prophet at a weekly salary of two guineas. You don't twig, I see. Well then, I mean a Prophet to predict the winning horses at all forthcoming races."

"Ah, I understand!" said Ben Limber. "But how long did you keep that situation?"

"Only six months," responded Mr. Bealby: "for the truth is that in no single instance did I ever predict accurately. Not that in this respect I was in any way worse than the Prophets on other newspapers—only the proprietor of the one to which I belonged was rather particular, and he thought that a prophet ought to predict right at least once out of twenty times. So he discharged me; and I was again thrown upon the world."

"And what did you do then," asked Ben Limber.

"I got up a Benefit Society," replied Mr. Bealby.

"A Benefit Society?" echoed his friend. "For whose benefit?"

"For my own," was the response. "It was ostensibly for the advantage of the working-classes—but in reality for mine. Every one who paid a few pence a week was to have fifteen shillings a week during illness—to be buried, when he died, with a good walking funeral, and his widow to have a ten pound note to buy mourning for herself and the children. I was Secretary, and Treasurer, and Auditor, and Manager——I think I was the Committee too: but I know very well that I was the principal recipient of the Society's benefits. At last there was an exposure and an inquiry: I was summoned before the magistrate—but I had taken very good care not to have the society enrolled; and therefore his worship had no power of jurisdiction. The case was dismissed; and in order that the members should not fall into most unchristian feuds amongst themselves relative to the division of the remaining funds, I put them into my own pocket;—and bidding an eternal farewell to the ungrateful neighbourhood of Whitechapel where the exposure had taken place, I established my quarters in another."

"And what was the next course?" inquired Ben.

"I never was a fellow who could work much as long as there was any ready money to spend: and so I lived comfortably until I changed my last sovereign—when I began to think of something else. So I took to the Christmas hamper dodge."

"What do you mean?" asked Ben Limber.

"Why, out of the change for my last sovereign," replied Mr. Bealby, "I paid seven-and-sixpence for an advertisement in the *Times*, which ran to the following effect:—'Bealby and Co., old established Wine-merchants, continue to despatch their famous Christmas hampers, but on reduced terms. To every person remitting one guinea, Bealby and Co. will forward a hamper containing one bottle of old port, one of rich brown sherry, one of old East India Madeira, one of French brandy, one of Jamaica rum, and one of prime Hollands.'—You would be astonished at the way in which the guineas came pouring in: so I kept up the advertisements during the Christmas week: then I renewed them for the New Year's week; and when that was over, I changed the name and address, and advertised splendid twelfth-cakes on similar terms. I reaped a golden harvest, and lived comfortably upon it for the next three months. At length one morning I sallied out, wondering what I should do next, with only eighteen-pence in my pocket——"

"And what did you do then?" inquired Ben Limber. "What could you possibly do with eighteen pence?"

"I went and took a theatre," was the cool reply.

"A theatre with eighteenpence!" exclaimed Limber. "Well, after all, my knowledge of the world is really nothing to your's!"

"I told you so just now," said Mr. Bealby. "Yes—it's a fact—I went and took a theatre at a rental of about a thousand a year."

"But what use could you turn it to?" asked his friend.

"Underlet it the very next day to some one else; and as he paid me the rent, but as I paid none myself, it was all clear profit as long as it lasted. But the proprietor sued me—I was put into prison, and had to petition the Insolvents' Court a second time."

"I should think you got remanded for that?" observed Ben Limber interrogatively.

"Nothing of the sort!" exclaimed Mr. Bealby. "I described myself as a Lessee—and that was sufficient. It is considered that every lessee or manager of a theatre may go through the Bankruptcy or Insolvents' Courts as often as ever they like; and they are always objects of sympathy. The Commissioner complimented me on not having had to insert the salaries of any performers in my schedule,—which was not however astonishing, as I had never employed any. However, I got off with flying colours—but with scarce a shilling in my pocket."

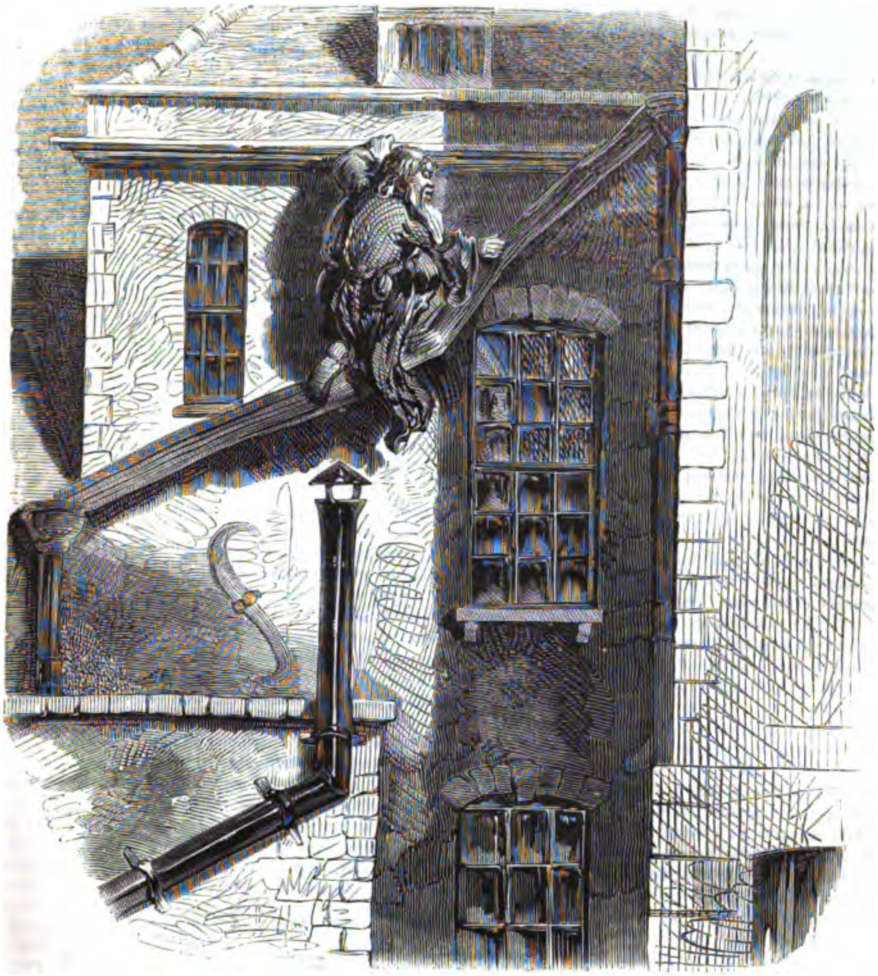
"And what did you do then?" inquired Mr. Benjamin Limber, who was evidently much interested in his friend's explanations.

"Why, just at that moment there was a grand festival going on in Paris: so I advertised that Mr. Bealby, the well known manager of excursion trips, offered to take a party over to Paris, paying the first-class railway fare thither and back—lodging and boarding them for a whole week at a first-rate hotel in the French capital—and supplying every luxury for breakfast, dinner, and supper,—all included for twenty guineas a head. Well, I contracted with the railway; and I had fifty subscribers to my party. We started:—this I was obliged to do, because according to agreement I was to collect the money at Dover. And you may be very sure that I *did* collect it there: but by some extraordinary mistake I took my place in a return-train immediately afterwards; and instead of going any farther on the way to France, I found myself supping again very quietly in London that same evening."

Mr. Benjamin Limber laughed uproariously at this last *escapade* of his friend Mr. Bealby, who himself joined in the mirth.

"And what did you do next?" inquired the younger gentleman.

"I found there was such a terrific exposure in the newspapers," was the reply,—"so many indignant letters were written—and so many unpleasant threats were promulgated about having me up before the Lord Mayor, that I deemed it expedient to take a trip into the country until the storm blew over. Unfortunately I got excessively drunk one night amongst a party of gentlemen somewhat sharper than myself; and when I awoke in the morning, I had not a single shilling left. There was a distressing position for a man of genius to be placed in! I went wandering about the country in a desperate state,—until one afternoon I reached an old deserted tile-kiln, with all the accompanying works in a dismantled and ruined condition. There I found an old man peering about in every nook and corner—digging up the earth—and apparently hunting for something. I watched him awhile from a distance,—thinking that he was a treasure-seeker. At length I accosted him. He was at the outset by no means inclined to be communicative: but as I had a presentiment that the encounter would tend to my advantage, I did my best to draw him into discourse. I learnt that he was a purveyor of curiosities for one of the old shops in Wardour Street, London—and that he was hunting for old earthen vessels in Warwickshire to save himself the trouble of going to Herculaneum or Pompeii in Italy. There was something in this pursuit which tickled my fancy. I offered to assist him; and I soon dug him out a lot of curious-shaped vessels and broken pipkins, which sent him into raptures. He paid me



liberally—gave me his address in London—and told me to call upon him. This interview gave a new impetus to my fertile fancy. I provided myself with all sorts of curiosities,—a piece of the true cross which a Cardinal had given me in Rome—a fragment of the holy coat which is preserved at Treves, and which fragment a monk whom I made tipsy had sacrilegiously torn off for my special gratification—the veritable cannon-ball which struck the spire of St. Stephen's at Vienna and knocked it on one side, when the Turks besieged that city—the bullet which slew Nelson at Trafalgar—the identical pen with which Napoleon signed the treaty of Amiens,—in short, I cannot enumerate the curiosities, ancient and modern, with which I provided myself while on my journey to London. Then, on arriving there, instead of calling on the old purveyor whom I had encountered at the tile-kiln, I went straight to the shop in Wardour Street, which he had happened to name to me; and I disposed of all my curiosities. But I was terribly disappointed at the pettiness of the price which I obtained for them. I really thought that I was playing an excellent game with the credulity of the curiosity-dealer,—until on grumbling at his terms, he gave me to understand it was the *ideas* he was paying for, and not the things themselves—for those he knew to be all humbugs. Then I laughed heartily—he laughed likewise—and the end of it all was he offered me a regular engagement. I remained with him for about six months, helping him with the ingenuity of my original ideas, and becoming initiated in many of the mysteries of his craft. He taught me, for instance, how to get up old pictures; and I learnt that he constantly employed six artists to paint him originals of Rubens, Vandyke, Titian, Greuze——"

"Originals?" ejaculated Ben Limber.

"Why, of course!—weren't they to be sold *as* *originals?*" demanded Mr. Bealby, somewhat indignantly. "And then too, my friend the curiosity-dealer taught me how to make mummies——"

"Make mummies?" cried Ben Limber, again in astonishment.

"Yes—to be sure!" exclaimed Mr. Bealby. "I myself got up a couple of mummies in so artistic a manner that a member of the Archæological Society proved in a neat and interesting speech of about six hours' duration, that they were at least four thousand years old; and there was not a dissentient from this opinion. You see that mummy there, in the glass case? I can assure you it was not in existence four months back; and this morning a gentleman belonging to that very Society, and who is considered to be one of its brightest ornaments—although he *is* deaf and half-blind—was thoroughly convinced that it is the oldest mummy ever brought into this country. He is to bring me twenty pounds for it to-morrow: but the worst of it, Ben," added Mr. Bealby, lowering his voice somewhat, "is that I owe fifteen pounds to my landlady; and she will take very good care to receive the money from the old archæologist, or else she won't let that blessed mummy go out of the place."

"How long did you stay with your curiosity dealer?" asked Ben Limber: "or perhaps I ought rather to have inquired why you left him?"

"Why, you see, the public curiosity is variable. To-day it's an old picture—to-morrow Tom Thumb: to-day some rubbish from Herculaneum — to-morrow the Bosjesmans. Well, just at that time the discovery of the Californian gold regions was making a tremendous sensation: so I had some thundering large pieces of granite carefully gilt, and I exhibited them as nuggets. They were in a glass case, and protected by a row of iron bars. I advertised that they were worth seventy thousand pounds; and all the town came to see them. At length one of the workmen who had helped to gild the granite, came to the exhibition one Monday morning; and as he was the worse for liquor to the extent of some three or four pots of beer, he let out the whole secret. I decamped—but with about eight hundred pounds in my pocket—the fruit of a fortnight's industry in displaying my nuggets. And would you believe it, Ben?—I fell a second time amongst thieves, and was plundered of my all!"

"Light come, light go," said Mr. Limber, laughing.

"Ah! it was no laughing matter for me," observed Mr. Bealby; "and I was obliged to take to something else. Some little speculation which I need not dwell upon——it was merely the exhibition of a sea-serpent, being three conger-eels curiously joined together——produced me fifty guineas; and then I resolved to turn curiosity-maker on my own account. I took these rooms: I applied myself assiduously to work—I invested my little capital—and now that I have got my stock-in-trade all in readiness, there comes a lull in the curiosity-market—things are flat—skeletons are below par—old armour is at a discount—there is no briskness in Roman brickbats—vessels from Herculaneum are dull—and nothing but that mummy appears to be looking up."

"As pleasant a series of adventures as ever one could wish to hear," said Ben Limber. "You are poor—and I am poorer still: you will have five pounds to-morrow for yourself out of the twenty—I have not got five pence, and no chance of getting them either."

"Never mind, my boy," said Mr. Bealby: "we shall be able to do something together. There's always a fine opening for men of enterprise and talent in this great metropolis. And I tell you what, Ben," added the archæological gentleman, in a tone of confidence—which was accompanied by a look rendered all the more mysterious by the influence of the alcoholic liquor,—"two chaps could work an oracle much better than one. I have often felt the want of a clever partner, or assistant. Lord bless you! if I had only possessed such an auxiliary as yourself, I should have invented and exhibited the perpetual motion long ago. But then where the devil was I to get a trustworthy fellow to turn the crank in the cellar?"

"True!" said Mr. Limber: "there are no doubt many things which two can do together, but which can't be accomplished by one."

"I have got hold of a capital idea," said Mr. Bealby: "but it wants a little cash to start it—some twenty or thirty pounds or so."

"Sell off the whole of this trumpery and raise the coin," suggested Mr. Limber.

"My dear fellow," responded his edifying friend Mr. Bealby, "you require to be enlightened on this point. These things are not worth eighteenpence, unless somebody takes a fancy to them. Look at their intrinsic value: it is nothing! Send them to an auction, or call in a lot of brokers—and to what ignominious nothingness do all my beautiful curiosities become reduced! A brickbat is then simply a brickbat: this corselet, which I declare to have been worn by Sir William Wallace at the battle of Falkirk, turns out to be a Horse-Guard's rusty breastplate, worth a few pence as old iron: that piece of pottery with the handle broken off, and with the letters T. I. scratched upon it—which I, speaking archæologically, pronounce to be an ancient Roman vessel of the time of the Emperor Tiberius—the initials standing for *Tiberius Imperator*,—that piece of pottery, I say, dwindles down in a moment to a base pipkin in which some urchin of modern times has confectioned hardbake or Everton toffie. So it is, my dear fellow, with the best part of these archæological marvels—with all the quaint dresses and curious costumes: or at all events auctioneers and brokers are such Goths and Vandals as to be utterly indifferent to the value with which antiquity stamps them. In a word, Ben, barring the mummy which is as good as sold, I don't think my whole collection, if sent to the hammer, would fetch ten shillings."

"Why not invite a number of your archæological friends to inspect the museum," asked Mr. Limber, "and tell them that you want to sell off in order to make a voyage round the world—or take a descent into Vesuvius—or to plunge into the Maelstrom to see what causes the whirlpool——"

"All this is ingenious enough Ben," interrupted Mr. Bealby: "and I honour you for the inventive genius you have just displayed. But the trick will not take. I told you just now that the curiosity market is as dull as ditch-water—skeletons are stagnant—armour is heavy—and there is no use in trying to create a sensation on behalf of Roman pottery."

"Then how is the money to be raised?" demanded Ben Limber: "for if this new idea of your's is such a good one——But, I say, we have got to the bottom of the bottle! and there isn't a weed left!"

"My credit is good for a fresh supply of both," answered Mr. Bealby; "and as we are combining business with pleasure, we may as well keep up the discourse an hour or two longer. I will just run over the way——"

"I rather think I will accompany you," said Ben Limber, glancing somewhat shudderingly around towards the skeleton and the mummy. "I don't exactly like the companionship."

Mr. Bealby burst out laughing; and rising from his seat, he said, "Come along, Ben: I've got a latch-key, and we can let ourselves out and in."

"Holloa! what was that?" asked Ben Limber, turning somewhat pale as he glanced towards the door.

"I heard nothing," responded Bealby. "What did you fancy it to be?"

"Only some strange noise. I say, who lodges overhead?"

"The landlady and the servant," replied Bealby: "but they have been in bed a long time, and are by no means likely to listen. However we shall soon see."

Thus speaking, he opened the door, and paused for a few moments on the threshold: but all was still.

"Come along Ben," he said, in a whispering tone so as not to disturb the landlady. "We shan't be many minutes in obtaining a fresh supply; and then we can make a regular night of it."

The two friends accordingly stole gently down stairs: but at the same time footsteps were still more silently descending from the upper storey; and the Burker made his way into the museum of curiosities. He had penetrated through an unoccupied attic into the house; and he had been listening at the door to all the latter part of Mr. Bealby's discourse. It was his temporarily retreating footstep which had alarmed Ben Limber.

The Burker had heard sufficient to inspire him with the hope that the museum would furnish him with some disguise; and now that the coast was clear, he had taken the liberty of penetrating into Mr. Bealby's archæological sanctuary. Closing the door, he was advancing into the midst of the encumbering assemblage of goods,—when he was suddenly startled by the appearance of the colossal skeleton. Seized with dismay, the Burker sank down upon the seat which Mr. Bealby had recently occupied: but it was only for an instant that the Burker's consternation lasted. He was not the man to be long overpowered by such a spectacle; and starting up, he muttered to himself, "By jingo! I ought to be more afeard of the livin' than of the dead!"

He looked around him in search of some suitable disguise: but he was bewildered by the variety of the articles which met his view, and the confusion in which they were amassed pell-mell. He knew not what course to adopt. To steal out of the house, dressed as he was, would be to risk immediate capture: for it was into Bow Street that he would have to pass. Every instant was precious: Bealby and his friend would be quickly returning. Even if he flung on some disguise selected from the choice around him, he might encounter them on the stairs—or at the door—or perhaps in the street itself; and the archæologist would raise a hue and cry at the appearance of his own property thus making its escape on the person of a stranger. The position was most critical: but a thought struck the Burker.

"These chaps are as precious a pair of rogues as ever one would wish to meet," he said to himself: and then, hastily drawing from his pocket the bank-notes given him by Marchmont, he counted them over. "Ninety pounds!" he musingly ejaculated; "and these fellers want a matter of twenty or thirty. By jingo, it's my only chance!"

Scarcely had he arrived at this conclusion, when he heard the front door open and shut; and he at once slipped behind the mandarin's robe, which was stretched upon the wooden frame in the same way that gentlemen's morning-gowns are displayed at the doors of haberdashers' shops.

Almost immediately afterwards Bealby and his friend Ben Limber re-entered the room, with a fresh supply of liquor and cigars. It would seem that during their absence some farther conversation on business-matters must have taken place: for as Ben Limber threw himself down upon his seat, he ejaculated, "'Pon my soul, Bealby, this new idea of your's is a capital one! What a terrible nuisance it would be if any one else should take it up——"

"A precious nuisance!" observed Bealby; "and just for the want of about thirty pounds or so! I wish I knew how to get the mummy out of the place without the landlady's knowledge: but it is impossible. She has got the eyes of a lynx; and what's more, when she dunned me for her rent this afternoon, I told her that the old gentleman would come to buy the mummy—and she was satisfied with my promise that she should receive the cash with her own fair hands."

"It is uncommon provoking!" said Ben Limber, in a tone of deep annoyance.

"Provoking? I believe you!" rejoined Bealby. "There's thousands to be made by that idea of mine. I would give anything to get hold of a clear thirty-pound note at this moment—so that we might start fair and unshackled: but where the deuce such a sum is to be got by anything like honest means, I don't know."

"Well, I say, Bealby," observed Mr. Limber, after a few minutes' pause, during which the process of drinking and smoking went on,—"suppose there was any way of raising this money *without* the strictest regard for what the world calls honesty,—what should you say? Mind—I have no settled plan—I'm only just thinking whether we ought to be over nice and particular——"

"Nice and particular indeed!" ejaculated Bealby with contempt: "nothing of the sort! You know enough of me, and you've heard enough to-night, Ben, to be pretty well aware that I shouldn't stick at a trifle: but at the same time, my boy, I try to steer clear of the law as well as I possibly can. Nice and particular indeed! Just to show you how nice and particular I am, I shouldn't mind accepting a loan from that murderer-fellow who was examined this afternoon at the office a few doors off."

"Which means," observed Mr. Limber approvingly, "that you don't mind where the deuce the money comes from, so long as it *does* come somehow or another."

"You've just hit it, Ben," answered Mr. Bealby.

"Well then, genelmen," a voice was suddenly heard to say, "I thinks as how I can accommodate you."

It would be impossible to describe the alarm which suddenly seized upon Mr. Bealby and Mr. Limber, as this strange, course, uncouth voice met their ears. But with the archæological gentleman this terror was transient enough—whereas with his more timid friend it assumed a most ludicrous aspect. With a ghastly pale countenance, and quivering in every limb, he looked towards the skeleton: thence his affrighted glances travelled to the mummy: and he knew not from which the voice proceeded, though he was firmly impressed with the conviction that from one or the other of those sources did it emanate. Mr. Bealby started up to see what the truth might really be, and what intruder had found his way into his museum,—when the Burker, thinking that the lapse of nearly half a minute was sufficient to prepare the gentlemen for his appearance, slowly emerged from his hiding-place.

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Mr. Bealby, not exactly perceiving sufficient of the individual's appearance to make him suspect who he might possibly be: for there was but one candle in the room, and this was burning dimly.

"Yes—who the devil are you?" echoed Mr. Limber, snatching up a tomahawk with one hand and a Roman pipkin in the other.

"I'm a chap as can let you genelmen have the little matter of thirty pound which you seems to stand in need of:"—and as the Burker spoke, he advanced nearer towards the table.

"A Jew!" ejaculated Bealby. "And yet he is not a Jew!—Ah!" and a sudden suspicion flashed to his mind.

"A Jew—and not a Jew?" echoed Mr. Limber, at the same time smitten with the same thought: and then he shuddered, and his teeth chattered, at the idea that he found himself in the presence of the terrible Barney the Burker.

"Now, genelmen, just keep your tongues quiet," said the Burker hastily; "and it will be all the better for you as well as for me. I'm just what you take me for: but here's the thirty pound you say you want and that you don't care a rap whence it comes from. In return for this, what I require is your assistance to help me to escape."

Limber sank with a hollow moan upon a chair, the tomahawk dropping from his hand on one side, the Roman pipkin on the other. He looked aghast. But Bealby was by no means affected in the same sense; and he hastened to say, "Don't be a fool, Limber. What is it to us who this fellow is? There's the blunt—and that's all we care for. Come, Ben," he added, going straight up to his friend and clutching him by the wrist, "don't be a fool, I say! He can't eat us—he doesn't want to do us any harm; and if he did, we are two to one."

These words, hurriedly and whisperingly spoken, produced a speedy effect upon Ben Limber: they inspired him with courage—for a coward invariably derives a reassuring sensation from the fortitude displayed by a braver companion. Starting up to his feet, he exclaimed, "Well, what can we do?"

"You have escaped, I suppose," said Bealby, turning quickly towards the Burker. "But how did you get in here?"

"I've broke out of the cell—I climbed up a pipe—I got to the roof of this house—I crept in at the attic——"

"Ah! the noise just now upon the stairs!" ejaculated Limber.

"To be sure!" rejoined the Burker: "that was me. I didn't know how to get out of the house: I was afeard of wenturing into the street, cos why it's infested by them 'ere waggabones of bluebottles. So I listened at your door—I heard a good deal of what you was saying to each other—I found you was the right sort of chaps to help a poor devil in a difficulty—I bided my time—you went out to get more lush—and then——But, by your leave, talking of lush——"

And the Burker, pouring a quantity of gin into a tumbler, drank it off at a draught,—his eyes scarcely watering, so accustomed was he to the potent alcoholic fluid.

"How can we get the man out?" asked Limber of his friend.

"How long ago was it you escaped from your cell?" demanded Bealby quickly.

"A matter of three quarters of an hour," responded the Burker; "and there's every minute a chance of the discovery being made. If so, as for going out into the street unless unkimmon well disguised——But fust of all give us some hot water to get off this cussed beard."

"Yes, at once!" answered Bealby. "Now I tell you what must be done. Ben my boy, stick your cigar in your mouth—go and saunter down the street towards the police-office and the station—see if there's anything strange going on——But stop one moment!"

Mr. Bealby rushed to the window—drew aside the blinds—and looked through the panes.

"All seems quiet," he continued, returning from the window; "but we had better make sure. You go, Ben, as I have just said, and keep out for twenty minutes or so——that is to say, supposing you see nothing in the meantime that looks suspicious. But if there is, then come back directly and tell us."

Mr. Limber accordingly lighted his cigar—stuck his hat upon his head with a jaunty, rakish, independent air—and flourishing his short cane (of the true gentish description) was about to issue from the room when the Burker suddenly placed his back against the door, saying in his gruff voice, "This is all wery well: but how the deuce do I know what's the true meaning of the move?"

"I understand you," observed Mr. Bealby, now assuming a decisive look and tone. "You think we mean to betray you. Very well—take up your bank-notes and be off."

"Come, come," said the Burker, "it wasn't 'andsome on my part—I must confess it wasn't."

"You know," rejoined Bealby, "that if we chose to open this window and raise an alarm, your capture would be certain."

"Beg pardon, genelmen, for my rudeness," said the Burker; "but hope no offence. Here's the door, sir:"—and he opened it to afford egress to Mr. Benjamin Limber.

"Now drink," said Bealby, "and refresh yourself while I go down stairs and see if there's any hot water in the boiler. I know there generally is."

Mr. Barnes sate down and helped himself to some more spirits,—at the same time saying to himself, "Well, blow me if all this isn't a rum tissue of adventures: but luck seems to be a-favouring of me—and I 'spose I shall get safe and sound through 'em."

In about a couple of minutes Bealby reappeared, with a pitcher of warm water; and he then conducted the Burker into a little dressing-room opening from the inner apartment. The criminal soon disencumbered himself of the beard and the rest of the false hair that was upon his face; and he felt himself considerably refreshed.

"Now, sir, what's the next move?" he asked, as he emerged from the dressing-room.

"You say you've climbed up the pipe and got to the roof of this house," asked Bealby. "Do you think there are any traces——"

"Yes—the pipe's all bended down," responded the Burker.

"Then take off that old black gaberdine and give it to me," said Bealby quickly.

The Burker, perceiving that his new friend had all his wits about him, unhesitatingly complied with his demand. Bealby took from amongst his miscellaneous stores a quantity of very old but very strong silken cord; and throwing the Burker's gaberdine over his arm, he crept up-stairs, having previously taken off his shoes so that he might proceed thus stealthily and avoid disturbing the landlady and her servant. He passed out of the attic window; and peeping over the parapet, looked to see whether all was quiet in the neighbourhood of the cells attached to the police-office. Satisfied on this point, Mr. Bealby crept on to the leads of the next house, and deposited the gaberdine there. He then tied one end of the silken cord round a chimney, and flung the rest over the back part of the house, so that it hung down into the yard attached thereto. Having done this—which was all the work of but three or four minutes—he retraced his stealthy way to his own apartments. There he explained to the Burker what he had done,—adding, "And now I think the police, when they discover your escape, will be thrown completely off the scent."

"Well, blow me," said the Burker, "if arter myself you ain't one of the cleverest chaps in the whole world! But what's the next move?"

"Ah! now we must hold a consultation," responded Bealby; "and we have leisure to do so. The trick I have just played will afford it us; because whenever the hounds pursue, the scent is broken—or I ought to say, turned into the wrong channel. It will never be suspected you are here. You see I am doing everything I can to make things right for you: and these bank-notes," added Bealby, now taking them up from the table, "are well earned."

"So they be," said the Burker. "You're an excellent sort of chap; and there's another ten pun' note to add to t'others:" then as he produced the dditional recompense, he thought to himself, "It don't matter how much I pay to make things square and get myself off: my werry partikler and intimate friend the Duke of Marchmont must dub up for it all."

"I was just thinking," said Bealby, "whether I could not give you some such disguise that you might be able to get out of the house at once——But here's Ben Limber returning!"

Mr. Limber had taken the latch-key with him; and he was therefore enabled to let himself in. He quickly made his appearance in the room; and his countenance indicated that he had intelligence of importance to communicate.

"The shindy's began," he hastily said the instant he had closed the door of the apartment. "There's a running to and fro betwixt the police-office and the station; and I heard one of the constables say in consternation 'He has escaped!'"

"Then it is out of the question," said Bealby, addressing himself to the Burker, "for you to think of leaving this house to-night. There will be a strict watch throughout the entire neighbourhood——"

"But how shall I be better off to-morrow," demanded Barney, "than I am to-night?"

"It is very certain you will not be worse off," rejoined Bealby; "and it will be very strange if we cannot think of some contrivance for your escape. Won't it be strange, Ben?"

"I should rather think it would," ejaculated Mr. Limber. "And yet I don't very well see how——"

"Well, I see everything!" cried Bealby as an idea struck him: but what this idea was, we need not immediately explain:—it will transpire presently.

Meanwhile the escape of the Burker had been discovered: Ben Limber's information in this respect was perfectly accurate. A constable had visited the cell,—first of all, however, only opening the little trap-door, and throwing the light of his bull's-eye inside. But his astonishment and consternation, on perceiving that the prisoner had vanished, may be more easily imagined than described. To raise an alarm was his first proceeding: then, on being joined by two or three other constables, he opened the door of the cell, and the truth became apparent: the mode of the Burker's escape was at once evident. The Inspector was speedily fetched from the station on the opposite side of the street; and a search throughout the neighbourhood was ordered. Constables were despatched in every direction, while the Inspector, with some of the most intelligent of his acolytes, lost no time in surveying the premises in the neighbourhood of the cells. Ladders were procured: they ascended to the roofs of the adjacent houses—the bent pipe was observed—and though the officers could scarcely persuade themselves that they had thus discovered the track taken by the Burker, yet they failed not to act upon the suggestion which it might seem to afford. By means of the ladders they quickly reached the top of the house to which that bent pipe led up, and beneath the roof of which the Burker was actually at that very moment concealed. But it was on the roof of the adjacent house that the old Jewish gaberdine was discovered; and then the Inspector exclaimed, "By heaven! after all the fellow did climb up that pipe!"

Next the cord was found; and the natural conclusion was that it formed another link in the clue which the officers had obtained to the track taken by the Burker.

"You see," said the Inspector, "there was that flat-roofed building betwixt the cells and those yards down below, which prevented the scoundrel from getting into them at once: so he had to climb first of all up to the roofs of these houses here, and then let himself down by this cord into the yard below. But it is no use our remaining here to chatter. Down the ladders again! over all those walls! and we may catch him yet!"

The descent was quickly made. One of the constables, speeding back to the police-court, gave orders for several officers to institute a special watch in Hart Street, which was the quarter where it was supposed the Burker would endeavour to find a means of making his exit. The Inspector, and the constables who remained with him, proceeded to examine all the premises in the rear of Covent Garden Theatre, with the hope of finding some fresh trace of the prisoner—but we need hardly say without any result.

We did not interrupt the thread of those explanations to state, as we must now do, that the occupants of the highest rooms of the houses to the roofs of which the constables ascended, were considerably alarmed—many indeed being startled from their slumber, by the heavy trampling of feet overhead as well as by the sounds of voices. At first there was an idea of fire; and attic-windows were thrown open in consternation and dismay: but the constables speedily reassured the frightened ones and made them acquainted with the reason of so much disturbance. Amongst the terrified persons to whom we have just alluded, were the landlady and the servant of the house in which Mr. Bealby dwelt: but on receiving the intelligence that there was no alarm of fire, and that the constables were merely in pursuit of a prisoner who had escaped, they retired to their respective couches again. We may add that the drawing-room storey of that house—namely, the floor just under Mr. Bealby's apartments—was unoccupied at the time: the ground-floor consisted of offices where no person remained at night; and thus, besides the landlady and her servant, there was nobody within the walls of the dwelling to be disturbed by the proceedings of the police.

It was now certain that the whole neighbourhood was closely watched by constables; and it was therefore impossible for the Burker to attempt an escape. It became absolutely necessary for him to remain in Bealby's apartments till the morning—when the idea which the archæological gentleman had already formed to effect his safe issue, might be carried out. Mr. Limber was anxious to get away and seek his bed in an attic which he occupied in some neighbourhood a couple of miles off: but Bealby would not let him depart.

"Deuce a bit, Ben!" he said, in a hurried whisper to his friend: "you and I must remain together until this fellow is safe out of the house. Though I am not afraid of him as long as I am awake, I don't choose to stand the chance of falling off to sleep if left alone with him. We will drink and smoke till morning, Ben."

Mr. Bealby had found the opportunity of whispering these few hasty words while the Burker was paying his respects to a half-quartern loaf and one-third of a Dutch cheese which had been set before him; and as many hours had elapsed since food passed his lips, it was with a terrific appetite that he now consumed the only fare which the archæological gentleman's larder (or rather cupboard) afforded.

"Now," said Bealby, when Barnes had finished his meal and had washed it down with a copious draught of gin-and-water, "you can step into that back room, stretch yourself on the sofa, and take a good nap. My friend and I purpose to sit up for the rest of the night. There is every reason to believe that you are safe; and in the morning we will carry out the idea which I just now described."

The Burker, who had now every possible reason to put implicit faith in Mr. Bealby and Ben Limber, withdrew to the sofa—or rather the old sofa-bedstead to which he was directed in the adjoining room: while the two friends sate drinking and smoking in the front apartment.

CHAPTER CXVII.

THE MUMMY'S CASE.

It was about seven o'clock when the Burker awoke from a deep uninterrupted slumber of several hours; and he found his host and Ben Limber performing their ablutions in the dressing-room. These two individuals neither felt nor looked any the better for having sat up drinking and smoking the entire night: but the contact of cold water refreshed them somewhat. The hour was approaching when the servant-girl of the house would enter to spread Mr. Bealby's breakfast-table; and he could not possibly devise any excuse to prevent her from thus coming in—or at least it was deemed advisable to avoid everything that might tend to excite suspicion.

"The girl may take it into her head to do out the dressing-room while we are getting breakfast," said Bealby; "or to sweep out the inner room—or a dozen different things. We must dispose of you, somehow or another," he added, turning towards the Burker.

"Any way you like, so as you doesn't give me over to the police, or manage matters so bad that you get me took again."

"Don't be afraid," answered Bealby. "Here, get some food at once—eat and drink. Now, Ben, you just stroll out as if to look at the flowers in Covent Garden Market before breakfast: you can hear what is being said about last night's business—you can buy a newspaper too; and if you come back in about ten minutes, our breakfast will be ready, and I shall have disposed of the Burker by some means or another."

"All right," responded Ben Limber: and he issued from the apartment.

"Now you know the idea which I explained last night," said Bealby, addressing himself to the Burker, who was devouring bread and cheese.

"About that queer-looking object which seems like a man that had been dried with the sun until he turned into leather? Well," added the

Burker, "I recollect perfectly that the idea was a good 'un."

"In five words I will explain it over again," interjected Mr. Bealby. "My landlady knows that the mummy is going away this morning; and so she won't be surprised to see the large case sent out of the house. You must get into that case with the least possible delay; and when Ben Limber comes back and says that things are all right—I mean that no sort of suspicion attaches itself to this place——"

"Deuce a bit!—there's no suspicion!" said the Burker; "or else the police would be precious soon down upon us. But you was going to say what was to be done when that friend of yourn comes back."

"He shall get a cart to put the case in: that case will contain you, my man; and then you can be conveyed out of London. That is all I can do for you: and I suppose that whenever you are free in the open country——"

"You can leave me to shift for myself," interjected the Burker. "But there's just one thing I should like to know: and this is——"

"I think I understand what you mean," said Bealby: "there will be a driver to the cart, and you do not see how he is to be managed? Leave this to me. I shall go with him to pretend to show him the way, and also to see that the mummy is carefully delivered. Don't be under any apprehension as to the result."

"Not I indeed," exclaimed the Burker, "now that I know you are going with the cart."

"Let us get to work," said Bealby, "before the servant girl comes in. You have done eating and drinking?"

The Burker answered in the affirmative. The mummy was taken out of the case and deposited in a trunk, where it was locked up. The case—which indeed was an old coffin, and of solid materials, but having a glass door instead of a lid—was now laid flat upon the floor; and Bealby bade the Burker enter it.

"But I shall want a bit of a disguise," said Barney: "for it's no use turning me adrift only half-togged as I am: I should deuced soon be nabbed by the police."

"I had not forgotten all this," replied Mr. Bealby: "but I meant to take a disguise with me, so that you might put it on when emerging from the case. I thought it would make you too big to lie down in that box."

"Well, what is it?" asked the Burker, sweeping his looks around upon the various articles aggregated in that museum.

"What do you say to dressing yourself up as a poor Lascar sailor?" inquired Mr. Bealby. "Here's a costume—I have a dye for your flesh—a dye also for your hair—and a thick black moustache. And then, too, a Lascar's disguise has this advantage—that you may pretend to be dumb if you like, or else not to understand the English language; so you won't be compelled to speak to a single soul that you may happen to encounter. If you don't like that disguise, I can dress you up as the old Norwood Gipsy——"

"What! as a o'oman?" exclaimed the Burker. "No, no—none of that 'ere!"

"Hush! not so loud! We must not be heard talking in this room; because I am supposed to be alone here."

"Well, I decide upon the Rascal sailor," said the Burker.

"The Lascar sailor, you mean," observed Bealby, with a smile.

"I des-say it's all the same—Lascar or Rascal," responded the Burker. "I think I'd rayther put on the disguise at once: I'm pretty sure as how I can stuff myself into that there box; and it will save a world of trouble when we get to the place where you mean to let me out."

"Good!" ejaculated Mr. Bealby. "Make haste and apparel yourself. Here! let me assist at the toilet: it will only be the work of a few minutes."

The archæological gentleman speedily produced a bottle of dye for the complexion, and which figured in the catalogue of his curiosities as an extraordinary liquid which some newly discovered tribe of Central South America were accustomed to use for staining their skins. He next produced a hair dye, which also had its appropriate legend in the same catalogue, and which legend was about as true as the one attached to the first-mentioned pigment. These two dyes were speedily used with such effect that the Burker's appearance underwent a complete transformation, which was rendered all the more perfect by the jetty moustache, artistically affixed, and concealing the defect in the miscreant's upper lip. The Lascar garb was assumed; and Mr. Barnes felt himself to be a new man.

Benjamin Limber now returned, with a morning newspaper, in which there was a paragraph of only a few lines in respect to the Burker's escape; for the lateness of the hour at which it had occurred, prevented the penny-a-liner who reported it from entering more elaborately into detail. It recorded the bare fact,—with the addition that in spite of all the efforts of the police the miscreant had not been discovered up to the hour when that paragraph was written—namely, at about one o'clock in the morning.

"Everybody is talking of it in Covent Garden Market," observed Ben Limber; "and the general impression is that you, my man, must have managed to get safe out of London. One thing is very certain—the police are altogether off the scent: for telegraphic messages have been despatched along all the lines, and three or four detectives have gone off in different directions. This is what I heard in Covent Garden; and so you see your continued presence in the neighbourhood of the scene of your exploit is not suspected."

"All this is most favourable," observed Bealby. "And now, my man, into the box with you, if you can stuff yourself in!"

The glass front opened like a door, or lid: Bealby raised it—and the Burker, assisted by Ben Limber, laid himself down in the coffin-like case. He completely filled it; and he growlingly muttered something about "having his limbs precious well-cramped before he got out of that cussed box again."

"At all events it is better than dancing upon nothing," observed Ben Limber.

Mr. Bealby broke out a small fragment of the glass in one corner of the lid, for the purpose of letting in the fresh air: then the lid was closed and securely latched. A quantity of old rusty green-baize was spread upon the floor; and while Ben Limber raised the head of the coffin-like box, Mr. Bealby proceeded to wrap the stuff round the case so that it covered the glass lid. A quantity of twine was wound round and round the coffin, in order to keep the baize in the position in which it was folded; and thus far the work was complete.

"Now," said Bealby, "the girl shall lay the breakfast-table; and I will go and settle with the landlady—or else I know very well she will not let the case go out of the house."

"But you will be parting with fifteen pounds?" whispered Ben Limber, with an air of discontent.

"I am certain to sell the mummy for twenty pounds to-day," responded Bealby; "and therefore in any case I must pay the old woman her rent. Besides, I have forty pounds in my pocket; and when I have settled the rent we shall still have twenty-five left. That fellow has got money," added Bealby, drawing his friend Limber apart; "and I must get some more out of him when the moment of liberation comes."

There was now a knock at the room door; and the servant-girl of the house made her appearance.

"That's right—lay the breakfast, Mary," said Mr. Bealby; "and be quick about it—for I've got to go out on business almost directly. There's the mummy to be taken to old Mr. Fossilton's house——"

"Beg your parding, sir," said a shrill voice of command coming from the passage outside; "but nothing leaves this house until my rent's paid. You know the agreement of yesterday, sir," continued the landlady—for she was the speaker; and she now pushed her way past the servant-girl into the room: "I am to receive the money when Mr. Fossilton comes—leastways, fifteen pounds of it, for rent and things which is due——"

"Softly, softly, my good woman!" said Mr. Bealby, assuming an air of dignity: "you must not treat people as if they were all a pack of swindlers."

"Swindlers, forsooth!" cried the landlady, who possessed a very vixenish countenance, and the short tip of whose nose, habitually red with drinking, was now still more inflamed with passion. "I don't like to use a harsh term, sir—but you yourself said it. I suppose now you are going to try and chouse me out of my rent, and to smuggle that there mummy out of the house?——Why, bless me, Mary! if it isn't packed up all ready!"—and it was with a perfect scream of rage that the landlady vociferated these words.

"Don't be foolish," exclaimed Bealby: "here is your money:"—at the same time he produced the bundle of bank-notes which he had received from the Burker. "My friend Mr. Limber brought me last night a remittance that I had been expecting: but as you, my good woman, had gone to bed I did not choose to disturb you."

"Oh! dear me, sir, it is not of the slightest consequence," said the landlady, her entire manner changing from enraged insolence to cringing servility. "I hope I have given no offence. I knew the rent was safe—I always said so to you, Mary—didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am, to be sure," responded the servant-girl, readily corroborating her mistress's falsehood.

"And I'm sure, sir," continued the landlady, "if I did press you for the rent, it was only because my landlord is so very hard upon me——"

"Well, well," interrupted Bealby, who was impatient to finish the scene; "there's your money—you can give me the receipt presently. I say, Limber, by the bye,"—and he turned towards his friend—"would you mind stepping round into Covent Garden while Mary is getting breakfast ready, and just see if you can hire a cart—a light one, with springs, you know, to convey the mummy to Mr. Fossilton's house."

"To be sure," responded Limber: and off he set.

The landlady gathered up the bank-notes which Bealby had thrown down upon the table; and with three or four curtsies she issued from the room—promising to fetch the receipt as soon as possible. Mary continued her preparations for the breakfast; and thus far things had progressed comfortably enough. The rent was settled—there could be no possible impediment to the removal of the case—and Bealby had purposely directed Limber, in the presence of the landlady, to go and fetch a cart, so that he might have the appearance of acting in a perfectly straightforward manner, without being anxious to conceal anything. But scarcely had the landlady got down stairs, when a double knock at the front door caused her to hasten and answer the summons.

It was an old gentleman of past sixty, to whom she gave admittance. He was tall and thin—dressed in black—and stooping slightly. He wore green glasses of the description called shades, as if for weak eyes or bad sight. He walked with a cane: he took a great deal of snuff—and not in a very cleanly manner, as his shirt-frill indicated. His face was very thin and very much wrinkled: his features were sharp; and he had a habit of puckering up his lips as he looked steadfastly at any object. This was Mr. Fossilton—a man of deep learning in everything connected with archæology, and of profound ignorance in everything that related to all other matters. He had written elaborate works upon subjects which scarcely interested fifty people in the whole country, but which he fancied had an interest for the entire world. He could make a speech of three hours' duration on an old pipkin dug out—or represented to have been digged out of Herculaneum: but he could scarcely say three words on any topic which people generally choose to converse upon. His house was full of curiosities,—or what he believed to be curiosities: he had spent nearly his whole fortune on things which he prized as being of inestimable value, but for the whole collection of which no plodding matter-of-fact person would have given him eighteenpence. Photography, the steam-engine, the railway, the electric telegraph, and all the brilliant discoveries or inventions of modern science, were with him as nothing in comparison with broken old china, bits of Roman cement, and other antique relics. He considered it of far greater importance to the world to find a clue to the reading of Egyptian hieroglyphics, than to contribute in the slightest degree to the progress of modern intelligence. Such was Mr. Fossilton—the type of that class who prefer groping their way through the darkness of the tombs and sepulchres in which antiquity lies buried, than to bask in the light of the knowledge of the nineteenth century.

"Is Mr. Bealby at home?" he at once inquired of the landlady.

"Yes, sir," she responded. "Pray walk up, sir: I know that he will see you at once. He has packed up the mummy all ready to send home to your house——"

"Capital!" ejaculated Mr. Fossilton, with accents of delight. "To tell you the truth, my dear madam—knowing from what you whispered to me yesterday, how poor Bealby was pressed for money—I was afraid that he might go and find another customer for that mummy of his; and I would not for the world have let it slip through my fingers. I know it is at least three thousand years old—the state of the wrappers proves it."

"Pray walk up, sir: I know Mr. Bealby will be very glad to see you. He has sent out to hire a cart to take the mummy up to your house," continued the garrulous landlady: "I dare say it will be here in a few minutes."

"Excellent!" ejaculated Mr. Fossilton. "Do you know, ma'am, there is food in that mummy——"

"Food in the mummy, sir?" cried the landlady, almost shrieking out in her astonishment.

"I mean food for the mind, my dear madam," responded the archæologist,—"food for a disquisition of at least six hours! Oh, the pleasure of unfolding the wrappings of that mummy! But I believe that I am to hand over the price to you?"

"Well, not exactly, sir," replied the landlady: "circumstances is now changed. Mr. Bealby is a very honourable gentleman—he has paid me my rent——But pray walk up, sir: he is just going to sit down to his breakfast; and his friend Mr. Limber—a very nice young gentleman, who brought him the money—will be back in a few minutes."

Bealby had heard the double knock at the front door · and at first he had thought it was Limber who might have forgotten to take the latch-key. But when two or three minutes elapsed and Ben did not make his appearance, Mr. Bealby began to get uneasy lest inquiries were being made relative to the Burker. He did not dare leave his apartments to step out upon the landing to listen —much less to steal down stairs to see who it was —because Mary was running to and fro, preparing the breakfast: he knew her to be inquisitive, and he feared that she might be seized with the inclination to draw aside the green baize and peep into the coffin-like box in order to see how the mummy looked when lying flat upon its back. Thus Bealby was kept in a state of anxiety for several minutes, until he at length recognised the footsteps and then the voice of Mr. Fossilton as he ascended the stairs in company with the landlady.

Mr. Bealby foresaw that he should have some difficulty in respect to this visit: for Fossilton might ask to have another look at the mummy before he concluded the bargain—or he might insist upon taking it away with him; and Bealby, well acquainted with his landlady's garrulous disposition, was quite certain she had already acquainted him with the supposed fact that the mummy was in readiness for such immediate transport to its destination. However, Mr. Bealby hoped that the difficulty occasioned by Fossilton's visit might be speedily surmounted by his own ready wit; and he therefore prepared himself for the emergency.

"I am sure I did right to tell you to walk up, sir," said the landlady, who since she had received her rent was all civility, and was now prepared to make herself most officiously obliging. "Mr. Bealby will be quite charmed to see you. You will find the mummy already packed up——"

"Well, well, ma'am," said Mr. Fossilton, "you have told me so two or three times; and I have no doubt it is the case. How do you do, Mr. Bealby?"

"How do you do, my dear sir?" cried the younger archæologist. "Pray walk in. Your visit is an early one—I am sorry to say I am excessively busy just at this moment——"

"Busy in getting your breakfast?" said Mr. Fossilton: "but that won't prevent us from settling our little bargain. I have brought the money—and I understand your friend has gone for the cart —— "

"Here it is!" exclaimed the officious landlady, rushing to the window, as she heard the sounds of the vehicle stopping at her front door.

"Ah! but I have a few other goods to remove first," said Mr. Bealby; "and the mummy shall come next. You need not pay me now, Mr. Fossilton: I will bring you up the mummy in the course of the day—a few hours indeed——"

"My dear sir," interrupted the old archæologist, "I have set my mind upon having it at once: I have walked down from Tavistock Square at this early hour on purpose to see you. You can let me have this cart—and your friend can hire another."

"I can do nothing of the sort," said Mr. Bealby, who was getting uncommonly anxious, though he dared not for the life of him betray his uneasiness. "I must remove some goods first——"

"Stop! there is another cart!" ejaculated the landlady; "and it is a man which I know and which sells pertaties. Mary!" she shrieked forth from the landing to which she flew; "stop that pertatie person—and say I have got him a job!"

"What the devil does all this mean?" demanded Ben Limber, as he now made his appearance. "I have hired a cart, and made a capital bargain."

"And now there are two," said Mr. Fossilton: "therefore I may at once take my mummy home. Here, Mr. Bealby, is the amount agreed upon—twenty pounds:" and the old archæologist, producing his pocket-book, drew forth the bank-notes from amidst a profusion of documents, all relating to his favourite science—especially a copy of a speech of seven hours' duration which he delivered at the last meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

Ben Limber now understood it all; and he perceived in what an awkward dilemma his friend Bealby appeared to be placed. But Mr. Bealby had by this time made up his mind how to act; and he therefore said with great coolness, "Well, Mr. Fossilton, since you are in such a hurry to become possessed of the mummy, we will conclude the bargain at once. Here it is:"—and he opened the trunk to which it had been consigned on being taken from the glass case.

"Well, dear me!" exclaimed the landlady, "I thought it was in that package which was already done up to be removed."

"I wish, ma'am," said Bealby, "you would have the goodness to leave me to manage my own business."

"Oh! well, sir, I'm sure I don't want to interfere," said the landlady, tossing her head indignantly. "I was only helping to the best of my ability: but I hope I may never speak another word if you didn't say just now—or leastways give us all to understand, that the big package yonder——"

"There's something strange in all this," said Mr. Fossilton. "Are you sure it's the same mummy you are now selling me,—the same that used to stand in the glass case——"

"Look you, Mr. Fossilton," interrupted Bealby; "a few words will explain it all. I have got some articles of a delicate and peculiar kind which I have sold to a gentleman; and I have packed them up in the glass case. For that reason I put the mummy into the trunk. Your profound knowledge will show you that it is the same mummy. Here it is, with its wrappers—I forget how many years old you pronounced it to be."

"Well, well," said the old gentleman, who in the meantime had been carefully examining the mummy through his green glasses: "it certainly does seem the same—it is no doubt all right. And now let it be conveyed in that trunk down to the cart."

"Here, ma'am," said Bealby, thus hastily whispering to his landlady, "just give the potato person, as you called him, a little drop of gin to drink, as it was very civil on his part to stop when Mary called him:"—and he thrust a shilling into the woman's hand.

She sped away to give one drop of gin to the potatoe person, and bestow half a dozen upon herself: a cord was put round the trunk; and Limber, assisted by Mary, conveyed it down-stairs—old Mr. Fossilton following. The instant they were gone, Bealby closed the door: and hastening to pull aside a portion of the green baize, he whisperingly asked, "Are you all right? have you got enough air?"

"Blow me," growled the Burker, "if I could have foreseen there was a-going to be such a precious shindy as all this——"

"Well, never mind — everything will be all right!" answered Bealby. "We will soon get you down into the other cart: I shall drive off with you—in half-an-hour the open fields will be gained beyond Holloway—and then you will be free as air."

"Make haste then," said the Burker from the depth of the coffin-like box; "for I'm so preciously squeeged and scrouged up here, I don't think as how I shall ever get the use of my limbs again."

Bealby sped to the window; and looking out, saw that the trunk containing the mummy, was just being consigned to the cart driven by the potato person, as the landlady most elegantly called him. Old Mr. Fossilton was helped up by Ben Limber into the vehicle: and seating himself upon the trunk, he took a huge pinch of snuff in complacent and satisfactory anticipation of the pleasure he was shortly to enjoy in unrolling the bandages which for three thousand years, as he thought, had enveloped his precious acquisition!

The potato person whipped the horse—the animal started off—but unfortunately at that very instant the rod or bar which kept the body of the cart tight down upon the shafts, accidentally came out. Up tilted the cart; and lo and behold! trunk, archæologist, and potato person were all pitched backward into the street. The cord fastening the trunk, either snapped or became untied; and out rolled the mummy. Mr. Bealby beheld the accident from his window, and gave vent to an ejaculation of mingled rage and disappointment.

A crowd instantaneously collected; and as Mr. Fossilton raised himself up with difficulty from the stones on which he had been so rudely flung, he thrust his elbow into the mummy's mouth, and sent the hideous looking apology for a face crashing in.

"My eyes, here's a go!" shouted a man from the Market, with half a dozen ropes of onions pendant to a stout stick over his shoulder, and a short clay pipe in his mouth.

"Hooray!" vociferated another individual from the same precincts, and who bore a basket of cabbages upon his head.

But those who were nearest to the scene of the accident, looked on with mingled dismay and horror: for the first glimpse they had caught of the hideous shape, as it rolled out of the trunk, naturally inspired those feelings.

"My mummy—O my poor mummy!" moaned Mr. Fossilton, who was reduced to despair.

"What's the old genelman a saying?" asked a ragged boy of a dilapidated costermonger.

"Vy, don't you hear?" was the response: "he's a calling out for his mammy."

"My eyes!" cried another: "he's raythber an old boy to be afeard that his mother should know he's out:"—and this jest was received with uproarious laughter.

"It's his mummy, you fool," said a somewhat superior species of the Market population; for the speaker had on some great holiday visited a museum of curiosities. "That's a mummy—most likely a King of Egypt, which died three or four thousand years ago and was preserved in bandages just as you preserve inguns in vinegar."

"A mummy indeed!" said a man, with a leathern apron on, who having emerged from the nearest public-house, had worked his way through the crowd with the well-meant purpose of rendering his assistance. "A rum looking mummy this here! It's uncommon like leather."

Thus speaking, the aproned individual took up a piece of the smashed countenance; and first breaking it into minuter fragments, he put a morsel between his teeth.

"Oh, the cannibal! Blowed if he ain't eating the mummy!" ejaculated several voices; and the foremost of the crowd gazed with a kind of awe-felt curiosity upon the mummy; and with mingled surprise and disgust upon the man in the leathern apron.

"Mummy indeed!" exclaimed this individual scornfully. "I 'spose you'll tell me next that I don't know what leather is. I haven't been a cobbler for these twenty-three years without knowing summut about the article I works with."

"Leather!" cried the indignant Mr. Fossilton, forgetting his accident—forgetting the crowd—forgetting the public place in which the scene was occurring—forgetting indeed everything except the sense of insult he was now smarting under at the idea of the gross manner in which the reputation of his mummy was assailed. "Leather? I tell you that this is a mummy—the corpse of some distinguished person of an ancient age—three thousand years old if it's a single day!—and that I'll swear by the wrappings! I am ashamed of you, my man. If it were an old shoe on which you were called to pass an opinion, it would be all very well."

"Three thousand year old—stuff and nonsense!" ejaculated the cobbler disdainfully. "I tell you it's leather—burnt, scorched, or something——And, by jingo! if I don't think it's some that I sold a genelman which lives up there in the second storey of that there house, and which is knowed to be uncommon clever at getting up these here sort of things."

At this crisis Mr. Limber, who had hitherto remained upon the spot to listen to what was taking place, was seized with a panic; and he sped away as fast as his legs would carry him. The unfortunate archæologist Mr. Fossilton began to look terribly crestfallen. He stooped down—took another green view of the mummy through his glasses—then pulled off the glasses themselves—and examined it more closely with his naked eyes. He could no longer conceal from himself that he had been grossly deceived. If the accident had not occurred to the mummy, breaking a portion of it, and thus showing of what it was composed, the probability is the cheat never would have been discovered, and Mr. Fossilton would have gone down to his grave in the happy conviction that he died in possession of a human relic thirty centuries of age. But now unfortunately the delusion was dissipated—the vision was dispelled—and this learned archæologist found that he had given twenty pounds for the mere purpose of being egregiously laughed at, jeered, gibed, joked, and taunted by a motley crowd of some two hundred persons.

His orders were quickly issued to the driver of the cart—or the potato person, as Mr. Bealby's landlady politely and courteously designated him. The mummy was thrust back into the trunk—the trunk was taken upon the shoulders of the potato person,—who, preceded by the indignant Mr. Fossilton, began to ascend the stairs towards Mr. Bealby's apartments.

The little scene which we have described from the moment of the tilting up of the cart, to that when the unfortunate mummy was being borne back to him who had manufactured and vended it, occupied about five minutes. Let us see what in the interim had taken place in the apartments of Bealby himself.

From his window the fabricator of curiosities had observed the catastrophe; and he had seen the cobbler emerge from the public-house. In him he recognised the very man of whom he had bought the old leather which formed one of the component parts of the mummy. Then he perceived his friend Mr. Benjamin Limber vanishing from the scene; and he felt convinced that some disturbance would ensue.

"Deuce take it!" he exclaimed, retreating from the window, and hastening back to the case in which the Burker was coffined. "Here's an accident!—the cart has upset—the mummy has tumbled out—— I think the trick is discovered!"

"What trick?" exclaimed the Burker, with so sudden a start, convulsively given inside the case, that it was a wonder he did not smash the glass lid above him.

"Nothing about *you!*" replied Bealby hastily. "That cursed mummy I mean!"—and back again he ran to the window. "As I live, that old scoundrel Fossilton is having the mummy brought back! I shall be compelled to disgorge the twenty pounds!"

"I say," vociferated the Burker from the glass case, "I've had enough of this—I can stand it no longer! Just let me out. My limbs is all cramped —a hundred million needles and pins is a pricking my feet. Let me out, I say!—or I shall be sufficated."

"Stop! an idea strikes me!" ejaculated Bealby. "What if I get old Fossilton to take you off to his house——But no! it will never do!"

"And why not?" asked the Burker. "Blowed if I don't think it's the best thing to be done. Just leave me to manage the old rogue when I do get to his house——"

"No, no!" responded Bealby: "no harm—no violence!"

"Nonsense! I'll only frighten him out of his life——"

"It must be so!" said Bealby. "Hush!—they are mounting the stairs!"—and he turned to meet the indignant archæologist, whose cane was fiercely tapping every step as he led the way to the second storey.

CHAPTER CXVIII.

THE ARCHÆOLOGIST.

The landlady, who had been standing at her front door to look at the accident, the crowd, and the disturbance, made way for Mr. Fossilton and the potato person to enter. Then, closing the door in the face of the crowd that came to peep in with intense curiosity, she followed the enraged archæologist and the bearer of the trunk up the stairs, —not rightly comprehending what had taken place, and therefore all the more anxious to push herself into Bealby's apartments.

"Here, sir, is a pretty trick you've played me!" exclaimed Mr. Fossilton, as he entered Bealby's front room.

"One word, my dear sir," said the ready-witted Mr. Bealby. "Here are your bank-notes: but just allow me to explain myself—and if my explanation is not satisfactory, you can take your money and be off with you. Here, you man, put down that trunk—there's half-a-crown for you—and take yourself off with your cart. Just have the kindness to tell that other carter who is waiting, to remain yet a little while; and I will settle with him also."

Mr. Bealby issued his instructions with much composure and self-possession: the trunk containing the unfortunate mummy was deposited upon the floor—the potato person touched his hat for the half-crown, and took his departure.

"Now, my dear ma'am," said Bealby to the landlady, thrusting another shilling into her hand, "just get something to comfort you after all this disturbance—and leave me to explain matters to my friend Mr. Fossilton."

The landlady accordingly vanished: the door was closed — and the old archæologist, assuming a peremptory air, said, "Now, Mr. Bealby, for these explanations."

"They are speedily given," was Bealby's ready response. "It is all nonsense about crying down the mummy, and all falsehood that the cobbler told you, just because I happened to owe him for a pair of shoes. Pray don't interrupt me! I see that you think the mummy to be worthless: you are prejudiced——Well, let it be granted that it *is* an imposture——I at least took it for a genuine article. However, it was not the one you were going to have sent up to you——"

"How? what do you mean?" demanded Mr. Fossilton.

"You bought the mummy in the glass case—and there it is, ready packed to be sent to you. I said so from the very first——"

"Ah! but you afterwards denied it," said Mr. Fossilton: "you told me likewise you had packed other things in the glass case——"

"All nonsense on my part!" ejaculated Bealby. "You saw that young gentleman who was with me —the one who went and fetched the cart? Well, he came to buy a mummy—this was last night—he took a fancy to the one in the glass case, and offered me fifty pounds for it. I agreed—but I did not mean to let him have it: I intended it all along for you. I meant to give him another——in shotr, that very one that the hubbub has just been about. But he came early this morning to secure his bargain—you came shortly after—you both bewildered and confused me—I scarcely knew how to act——"

"Ah! ha!" said Mr. Fossilton: "I begin to understand! So the real mummy—*my* mummy—is in that glass case after all?"

"Yes—and you may take it away with you at once!" said Bealby: "the cart is at the door. Stop!—there's no need to go peeping through the baize! Here's your twenty pounds—examine the mummy as much as you like when you get it home at your own house—consult all your friends—and if I have deceived you, tell me I'm a rogue. But if not, send me the money by post—or by hand—or bring it to me——anything you like, only be quick and let us make an end of the business!"

Mr. Fossilton evidently thought this a very fair, candid, and straightforward proposal. He therefore took back the bank-notes from Mr. Bealby—and said, "Well, I accept the arrangement. You know I am a man of honour: if the mummy suits, I will pay you."

"Good!" ejaculated Mr. Bealby: "that will do. I mean to accompany you to your own house, just to see the case safely delivered, and assure myself that there is no farther accident. Have the kindness to call over the landing for Mary, that she may bid the carter come up and help me down with the package."

Mr. Fossilton did as he was desired; and Mr. Bealby, hastily approaching the case, whispered through the hole in the glass lid, "It is all right!"

"So much the better," growled the Burker from within.

Bealby gave a last look, but a careful and scrutinizing one at the green baize and the cordage, to assure himself that the box was completely enveloped in the wrapper. A few moments afterwards the man whose cart had been hired by Ben Limber, made his appearance in the room. He was a strong burly fellow; and by his stalwart limbs, his broad shoulders and capacious chest, seemed quite capable of carrying the package without any assistance. Therefore, when Mr. Bealby lent his succour, the carter did not complain of the weight, although the Burker was assuredly not the lightest individual in existence.

"You see," said Bealby, as they descended the stairs, "the box containing this mummy is lined with tin,—which makes it heavy; for I don't suppose the mummy itself weighs above half a dozen pounds, wrappers and all."

"Lord bless you, sir! the weight's nothing," responded the carter. "If you worked in Common Garden, as I do, and had to carry a vaggin-load of taters, or cabbages, or what not, upon your shoulders at times when unloadin' the market-carts, you wouldn't talk about this here package being heavy."

"Well, I am glad you do not complain," said Mr. Bealby; "and if you are very careful in the business, and don't disturb this green baize at all, or let the air get into the box, you shall have an extra crown for your trouble."

This assurance greatly delighted the carter; and he resolved by his carefulness to win the present which was thus promised. The front door was opened: the crowd had by this time dispersed, with the impression that there was nothing more to see; and Mr. Bealby had the supreme satisfaction of beholding the package safely consigned to the cart.

"Do you mean to go with us?" he hastily demanded of Mr. Fossilton.

"To be sure!" responded the archæologist, who would not for the world lose sight of the precious object which had already cost him so much trouble.

"Then jump up! be quick about it!" said Mr. Bealby; "and let us be off—or else we shall have more loiterers collecting in the hope of beholding another accident."

The cart drove away: and Mr. Bealby began to breathe more freely. He had succeeded in getting the Burker out of his house; and this was a most important achievement after all the adverse circumstances which had occurred. For he knew perfectly well that if it were discovered that he had harboured the escaped murderer, he would have drawn down upon his own head the vengeance of the law. How the Burker might presently extricate himself from the embarrassing position in which he would be placed, when Fossilton should proceed to take off the green baize wrapper,—was a subject of comparative indifference with Mr. Bealby: for he was resolved in his own mind not to return to his lodging until by some means or another he should be satisfied that the adventure issued in a way which was not likely to compromise himself.

Mr. Fossilton's house in Tavistock Square was reached in safety. The old gentleman was a bachelor: he kept but two servants,—one being a cook, who was more ancient, more blind, and more deaf than himself—the other being a country girl who acted as housemaid, and who being inexperienced in London life, was devoid of any impertinent curiosity. There was a side-entrance to Mr. Fossilton's abode; and it was here that the cart halted. The package was safely conveyed into a room on the ground floor, which served as the archæologist's museum: the carter was liberally remunerated according to promise—Mr. Bealby lost not an instant in taking himself off—and Mr. Fossilton was now left alone with the baize-covered package, which had been deposited upon the floor in the middle of the room.

First of all locking the door, so that he might not be disturbed by the entrance of any of those archæological friends who were in the habit of frequently dropping in to discuss the very interesting and useful subjects to which they so wisely devoted the whole attention and business of their lives,—Mr. Fossilton took a knife and proceeded deliberately to cut the cords which retained the green baize so closely wrapped round the glass case. Then he took a pair of scissors, and began to cut away the green baize from the top; because, inasmuch as it was folded two or three times round the case, he would have had to lift the case itself to remove the baize unless he adopted this shorter and easier plan of cutting it. He was very careful in the operation, for fear of breaking the glass lid: and, as the reader will comprehend, when he had cut one fold lengthways, he had to do precisely the same to each successive layer of the enveloping cloth. Proceeding thus deliberately, Mr. Fossilton did not choose to take a peep into the case until the proper moment should arrive, when he could at one glance embrace the entire contents thereof. He did not wish to anticipate the pleasure which he flattered himself he was about to enjoy. Thus, slowly and gradually did he prosecute his work, in a methodical manner, until the last fold of the wrapper was cut through, and the whole of the baize fell away from the lid of the box!

"Dear me!" ejaculated Mr. Fossilton: and he peered in mingled astonishment and dismay over the object which now met his view. "This is very strange!—very strange indeed! Why—how—what—eh?"

It certainly did *not* look like a mummy. The dress was white; there was a sort of turban on the head—the complexion of the individual was quite dark—there was a moustache upon the lip. Surely this was no mummy? And yet what else could it be? The eyelids were closed:—motionless as the dead lay the Burker!

Mr. Fossilton stooped lower down, and looked closer and closer into the case—or rather, we should say, through the glass lid. If this were a mummy it was the most extraordinary one, as well as the freshest, he had ever seen. Had Bealby deceived him? No: this was scarcely possible; because he had given him back his money—he had left himself at his mercy in respect to payment—everything seemed quite honourable, straightforward, and proper on that individual's part. Ah! a sudden thought struck Mr. Fossilton. Mr. Bealby had prepared for him a great surprise! How kind of Bealby!—how good of him! Doubtless it was some wondrous novelty in the sphere of what we may term Mummyism, which through the agency of that same excellent Mr. Bealby had now fallen into his hands! Enraptured with the thought, Mr. Fossilton opened the glass case, and was in the act of stretching forward his hand to touch the countenance of the supposed mummy,—when the Burker suddenly opened his eyes and raised himself up to a sitting posture!

It was not exactly terror which seized upon Mr. Fossilton: it was a general stupefaction—a paralysis of the senses, which, without absolutely depriving him of his consciousness, made him sink down upon a seat and gaze through his green spectacles, as well as open-mouthed, upon this extraordinary proceeding.

"Don't be afeard, old genelman: I ain't agoing to eat you," said the Burker, as he now endeavoured to rise up completely from the interior of the case: but the task was a difficult one, his limbs being horribly cramped. "Well, I'm blowed if this here ain't pleasant—cuss it!"

Mr. Fossilton groaned—but did not move one hair's-breadth more than if he had been a veritable statue, or one of his own petrifactions placed in that chair.

"Well, I'm sniggered if this ain't a pretty job!" continued the Burker, growling savagely: "to get one's legs as palsied as if they was frozen—blow me, it beats the gallows—beats it hollow!"

Here Mr. Fossilton, abruptly seized with the terrifying effect of a complete and utter revulsion of feelings, sprang from his seat and darted towards the door. The sense of sudden and frightful danger to which he thus became exposed, acted like galvanism upon the Burker; and rushing after the archæologist, he grasped him violently by the arm.

"Hold your tongue!—don't cry out—don't say a single word!" growled the Burker: "or by jingo, I'll do for you!—I'll cook your goose in a jiffey!"

Thus speaking, he at the same instant snatched up an old rusty sword which lay upon a shelf close at hand, and which was supposed to have been the one wielded by Edward the First at the Battle of Falkirk:—or at least, such was the assurance given some time ago by Mr. Bealby when he sold the curious weapon to its present owner.

"What would you do, unhappy man?" asked Fossilton, trembling with mingled alarm and horror. "You would not murder me? No—no—you—you—you—would not mur—ur—ur—der me?"

"No, not if you keep quiet!" responded the Burker. "I'm as innocent as a young lambkin which skips in the fields when folks let me alone."

"But *who* are you? what does all this mean?" asked the bewildered Fossilton. "You are dressed like a Lascar—but you speak English—if not exactly with the purity of Bunyan's style, at all events with a certain facility——"

"Leave Corn and Bunion to theirselves," said the Burker: "and now just listen to me. There! you'd better sit down again, sir—you're all over in a tremble and quiver—and shivery shakey like—come, sit down, I say—d'ye hear? It's no use your keeping near this door."

"Well, well—what do you want? who are you? and what does all this mean?" inquired the archæologist, whose mingled bewilderment, terror and dismay defy all power of description.

"Now there's no use in shuffling about with the question," said the miscreant: and planting himself opposite the miserable archæologist, who had again sank down into a chair, he added in a cool independent manner, "I suppose you've heerd tell of one Mr. Barnes, better knowd as the Burker?"

"Good heavens! the murderer?" ejaculated Fossilton faintly.

"Well—you may call him *that* if you like," proceeded the ruffian: "but here he stands in his own precious identity afore you. Not another word, old genelman!—dare to cry out, and I split your head open! There now! be quiet, like a good old man—and no harm will happen. I'm going to take my leave of you in a few minutes; and I don't think the parting will be werry distressing for either of us."

Mr. Fossilton looked as if he entertained precisely the same view, and as if the speedier the separation took place, the better he should be pleased.

"Now you see, my fine old feller," continued Barnes, "it won't do for you to say a single word about this here business: 'cos why, if you gives information, and if I'm took on account of it, I shall werry coolly say that you was in the trick with Bealby to get me out of my trouble, but that you arterwards turned round upon me, 'cos why I didn't come up to the mark in the cash department."

"Good heavens! what a distressing position for a man like me to be placed in!" moaned the miserable archæologist, giving way to his lamentations. "Miserable position! miserable, miserable!"

"Not a bit on't!" replied the Burker. "All you've got to do is to hold your tongue—and nobody will be the wiser."

"Well—I won't say a word—don't be afraid—but for heaven's sake go!" said Mr. Fossilton imploringly "Go! and I will forget that you have ever been here—that I have ever seen you. But if this isn't the last time that I bargain for mummies——"

"To be sure! You'll know a trick worth two of that," ejaculated the Burker, with a chuckling laugh. "Now just let me sit down and write a bit of a note—and then I'll take myself off."

The miserable archæologist pointed to a table on which there were writing materials: the Burker coolly seated himself, and proceeded to commit a few lines to paper. Though the billet was short, yet the process of writing it was somewhat a tedious one, inasmuch as Barney was a very indifferent penman; and thus, during the ten minutes he was engaged with his correspondence, Mr. Fossilton sate in a perfect agony of dread and horror. To be there with a murderer—there with one who might suddenly turn round and murder him—the thought was hideous! The poor archæologist's brain was in a perfect whirl; and he bitterly repented his dealings with Mr. Bealby. But the Burker really had no intention of harming the old man: he saw that it was easy to intimidate him, and that the effect of this intimidation would not speedily wear off.

The note was concluded: it was folded up—sealed—and duly addressed to the personage for whom it was intended; and the Burker secured it about his person. Then rising from his seat, he surveyed himself in a looking-glass; and he felt convinced that his present disguise of a Lascar was, if anything, more perfect than even that of a Jew which he had so recently worn.

"Now, you understand, old genelman," he said, turning towards the archæologist, "the conditions on which we separate. You hold your tongue about me—and I shall hold my tongue about you. But if so be you take any step to put the police on my track, I'll tell such a pack of lies when brought up before the beak, as shall get you lagged—that's transported, I mean——for harbouring a chap in my position. So now you know. Is it a bargain—or is it not?"

"It is! it is!" replied the trembling archæologist. "Heaven knows I want to wash my hands of this business! There, there, my good man——not my good man——my man, I mean ——anything you like to call yourself——there's a five pound note for you——and pray take yourself off!"

"Thank'ee kindly, sir," responded the Burker, who beheld in this little incident an additional proof of Mr. Fossilton's utter timidity and of his anxiety to hush up the matter as soon as possible. "Good bye, sir."

Thereupon the Burker unlocked the door, issued from the room, let himself out by the side entrance, and gained the street.

CHAPTER CXIX.

RESPECTABILITY.

THE scene now shifts to a very elegant suburban residence on Brixton Hill. It was a villa—not very spacious, but genteel in its exterior—commodious and beautifully appointed internally. It stood in the midst of a well laid-out garden, in which there were hot-houses and conservatories: while the occupation of a groom who was engaged in washing a handsome carriage of the description known as a clarence, seemed to proclaim that the occupant of the villa must be in very easy circumstances. And such was the case: for this beautiful suburban residence was the one to which Madame Angelique had retired about a week back, after having broken up her establishment in one of the fashionable quarters of London.

It was about the hour of noon—and Madame Angelique was reclining upon the sofa in a beautifully furnished parlour, with a number of French newspapers and Fashion-books scattered around her. She was dressed in an elegant dishabillée, which however would have rather become a young lady of between twenty and thirty than an elderly dame of about fifty. But then she wore it with such an exquisite Parisian coquetry—and the beautiful French cap so completely concealed the false front which Madame Angelique wore—the rouge and the pearl-powder, too, were so artistically laid on—the brilliant set of teeth looked so perfectly natural, and did such infinite credit to the Parisian dentist who made them,—that Madame Angelique might certainly have passed herself off as being ten years younger than she really was.

A loud knock at the door presently made her lay aside the French Fashion-book which she was reading at the moment: for though she had given up her trade of milliner, together with the more questionable one which she had conjointly carried on,—yet she continued to experience a lively curiosity in everything which regarded the newest modes for ladies' apparel. The window of the parlour in which she was seated, commanded a view of the projecting portico of her villa-residence: so she rose from her seat, and just peeped between the muslin curtains to see who the visitor might be.

"Shadbolt!" she half-ejaculated; and an expression of annoyance flitted over her countenance. "This man will prove an extortioner," she continued, musing to herself: "I see that he will—if I let him. But I must extricate myself from his clutches. Nevertheless, the fellow has hitherto been useful——"

At this moment the parlour door was thrown open; and a neatly attired, coquetish-looking female-servant, with very pretty features, duly announced Mr. Shadbolt. This individual was dressed in what both himself and his tailor meant to be the very extreme of fashion: but the natural vulgarity of the man marred all the effect which exquisitely cut garments would otherwise have produced. He wore a profusion of jewellery: indeed it would seem as if he had studied every possible means of crowding gold chains and other trinkets about his person. He affected a half-rakish, half-jaunty air, as if he were perfectly satisfied with the style in which he was thus playing—or shall we say *aping* the West End gentleman?

"Well, my dear madam," he said, throwing himself upon the sofa, near the retired milliner, "how do you get on in your new abode?"

"Having only been here a few days," responded Madame Angelique, "I cannot as yet say much about it: but I have every reason to believe that I shall like it."

"Well, I think I am a little too early for lunch," said Mr. Shadbolt, taking a gold watch from his pocket: "so we will have a little chat upon business before the tray is brought up."

"What business can you have to talk to me upon?" inquired Madame Angelique. "Now that those girls are fully disposed of——"

"Ah! was not all that capitally managed?" ejaculated Shadbolt, with a loud hilarious laugh. "That was my idea—and it was I also who found Cartwright to carry out the business."

"Yes—there is no denying that the affair was capitally managed," said Madame Angelique. "But——"

"Ah! Cartwright is a clever fellow—is he not?" proceeded the visitor. "In some respects he beats honest Ike Shadbolt. Only think of that young fool Augustus Softly marrying Armantine, and being so eager to display the certificate to Cartwright the next time he called——"

"Well, Armantine is excellently provided for—at least for the present," observed Madame Angelique. "She will of course ruin Softly in process of time——"

"Oh! that's a matter of course!" ejaculated Shadbolt, with another hilarious laugh. "But I'm sure I don't know which to admire most,—the way in which Cartwright managed with that fool Softly in respect to Armantine—or the manner in which he dealt with old Lord Wenham in respect to Eglantine. At all events we have done well for the two girls. Armantine is married to an Honourable—Eglantine to a Lord. And as for Linda—she is happy enough with Cartwright himself. Ah! but you should have seen that miserable fellow Choker's countenance when I personated Mr. Downy of the firm of Catchflat, Sharply, Rumrig, and Co.——"

"I have no doubt of it," said Madame Angelique, rather impatiently: "but we have discussed all these subjects before."

"Yes—and we have divided the spoil too," exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt with a laugh. "I must say that Armantine came down very handsome with five hundred pounds the moment she had married Softly—and Eglantine with five hundred also when she became Lady Wenham. But it was also generous on our part to let Cartwright keep all he got by Linda for himself,—you and me remaining content with five hundred apiece—the very identical sums we got from the girls——I suppose we must now call them the Hon. Mrs. Softly and Lady Wenham. Nothing like speaking respectfully of ladies in high condition!"—and again Mr. Isaac Shadbolt laughed hilariously.

"And you have made a good use of your share of the money, as well as of all the other little emoluments you have derived from your acquaintance with me:"—and as Madame Angelique thus spoke, she slowly surveyed the well-dressed, gem-bedizened person of Mr. Shadbolt.

"To be sure, to be sure!" said this individual, complacently playing with the watch chain which festooned over his silk waistcoat. "But now to business! It is my intention to make hay while the sun shines—strike while the iron is hot: that is the invariable maxim of honest Ike Shadbolt—and it is one to be followed by all sensible people?"

"What do you mean?" asked Madame Angelique. "Of course you cannot suppose——"

"That I am to prey upon your purse?" interrupted Mr. Shadbolt. "Certainly not! Ah! you see that I understood what was passing in your mind. But come—don't be alarmed!—it is all fair and above-board. Do you not recollect that when you were going to give up the millinery establishment, I said I would put you up to making a little money in other ways——"

"I recollect perfectly," answered Madame Angelique: "but I thought when we had accomplished all those things in respect to Armantine, Eglantine, and Linda——"

"That my inventive genius was exhausted? Nothing of the sort! It only shows how little you really know of honest Ike Shadbolt. Bless you, my dear madam! I am up to a trick or two I can assure you:"—and he winked most knowingly.

"Well, what do you mean?" asked the Frenchwoman impatiently. "I wish you would come to the point."

"During your time," proceeded Mr. Shadbolt,—"I mean while you have been in business, you have been enabled to oblige countless numbers of great and wealthy persons, both male and female. I mean, in plain terms, that many lords, ladies, and gentlefolks, have seen the interior of your private rooms at the fashionable establishment which you have just given up——eh?"

"To be sure," said Madame Angelique. "And what then?—what do you mean me to understand——"

"You shall soon see," continued her visitor; "and then you will form a still higher opinion of your obedient humble servant, Isaac Shadbolt, Esquire. Please to listen attentively. At this fashionable house of your's there have been wives who did not come there to meet their husbands—and there have been unmarried ladies who did not afterwards marry the lovers whom they met there, but who have since been conducted to the altar by credulous ones who little suspected their antecedents. Is not all this true?"

"Very true," responded Madame Angelique. "And now I see what you are driving at——"

"Stop! let me finish, and we will debate upon the subject. You *must* be aware, with a little reflection, that in having accommodated so many different ladies and gentlemen, you established everlasting claims upon their gratitude—and which claims, my dear madam," added Shadbolt significantly, "they will not dare to ignore. I tell you what you must do. Just make out a list of some ten or a dozen of the ladies who are thus indebted to you, so that we may hold a committee of ways and means and vote the amount which each lady is to contribute to our treasury. Then I tell you how we'll manage it. You shall write a sweet pretty little note—pink paper—scented—folded into three-cornered shape—and all that sort of thing; and you will say in each note something to the following effect:—'Madame Angelique, having retired from business, respectfully solicits the earliest convenient settlement of Lady So-and-So's account—474*l*., as per bill delivered. Madame

ANASTATIA.

Angelique begs to add that she has placed her outstanding accounts in the hands of Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, who will save her ladyship the trouble of sending to Brixton Hill, by personally waiting on her ladyship at So-and-So Mansion.'—There! what do you think of that?" exclaimed Shadbolt triumphantly.

"None of these ladies owe me anything at all," responded Madame Angelique: "they have all paid me——"

"I know that very well," said Shadbolt; "and you know equally well that it has nothing to do with the case. You write the billets—let me take them—and you will very soon see if in every instance I do not obtain the money. If any indignation is shown, I shall very soon give the fair ones to understand that it is a bribe for your secrecy in respect to their former doings at your house. In short, it is a genteel and pleasant little mode of extortion which they cannot possibly resist."

Madame Angelique reflected for some moments; and then she said, "I would rather not do it—much rather not."

"Oh, I understand!" cried her visitor petulantly; "you have not sufficient confidence in honest Ike Shadbolt? you think that when I once get hold of the money, I shall use the last syllable of my name—which means *bolt*. But there's nothing of the sort to be feared. Honour amongst ——ahem! I mean honour betwixt Madame Angelique and honest Ike Shadbolt."

"Still I would rather not," answered the retired milliner.

"How ridiculous!" ejaculated Shadbolt. "You know that you can trust me. Besides, give me one little billet at a time; and as I bring back the cash to be divided, you can give me another."

"You do not understand my objection," said Madame Angelique. "The truth is that my late business was nearly getting me into such serious trouble—as no one better knows than yourself—that when I settled down here at this villa, I made up my mind to lead a quiet life and avoid everything that could possibly involve me in difficulties for the future."

"But there is no chance of trouble in what I I propose," persisted Shadbolt. "The proceeding——"

"It is extortion—or attempted extortion—or whatever the English laws calls it," observed Madame Angelique.

"Not a bit of it! Suppose, for instance, a lady defies you—takes the high ground—says that she owes you nothing—that she can produce your receipts—and that she does not understand the nature of the threats held out through me? Well, if we really see that the game can't be played in that quarter, an apology must be made. 'Madame Angelique presents her compliments to Lady So-and-So, and deeply regrets that a mistake should have been made in respect to her ladyship's account, which was entirely owing to an erroneous entry in Madame Angelique's books; but which is now completely rectified.'—What can be better than that?"

"This does indeed look feasible," said Madame Angelique: "but I will think over it——there is no hurry for a day or two——I will let you know."

"Good!" said Shadbolt. "There is, as you say, no hurry in the matter. And now I'll ring for lunch."

With that free-and-easy, independent manner which characterized him, Mr. Isaac Shadbolt pulled the bell; and when the pretty maid-servant answered the summons, he said, "Your mistress wants you to bring up lunch, my dear."

"Yes, sir:"—and the girl was about to retire.

"Stop one moment!" exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt. "Bring up everything cold there is in the larder, so that I can take my choice——and some bottled stout—port and sherry, of course——and I don't mind having a glass or two of that fine old Madeira——"

"Bring up the tray, Jane, as usual," said Madame Angelique, thus addressing herself to the servant and cutting short her visitor's multifarious orders. "Mr. Shadbolt," she continued, when the maid-servant had withdrawn, "I must beg of you to let me be the mistress of my own house. You are very welcome to visit me—and if we enter into that business of which we were just now talking, it will be necessary that you should call frequently. But you must not usurp an authority within these walls—you would compromise me seriously. Pray bear in mind that I have got an entirely new set of servants——none of those that I had at the other establishmeut. All they know of me is that I am Madame Angelique, the fashionable milliner, who has retired from business on a fortune——"

"And quite enough for them to know! Depend upon it, my dear madam, you shall never be compromised by honest Ike Shadbolt."

"I hope not," responded the Frenchwoman emphatically. "There is not a soul in the neighbourhood who suspects that there was anything wrong in that establishment of mine: the clergyman has already left his card—two or three good families have likewise called——"

"Then you will be giving a party soon," exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt: "and I shall be master of the ceremonies. By the bye, that is an uncommon pretty girl—the parlour-maid, I mean——"

"I hope you will not speak to her familiarly, nor look at her insolently," said Madame Angelique, with grave and serious demeanour.

"No, no, my dear madam!" responded Shadbolt. "I do not forget that you have grown respectable. Ah! it's a capital thing to become respectable—and settle down in a respectable neighbourhood—and be visited by respectable families—and go to the Protestant Church or the Catholic Chapel in a respectable way on Sundays ——Ah, by the bye! if I were you, my dear madam, I would come the church-dodge: there's nothing like the church-dodge. Be sure to hire a pew—go to church regularly: and if you can snivel a little bit in the middle of the sermon—of course choosing the proper part—your respectability is established."

Madame Angelique could not help smiling at this tirade into which Mr. Isaac Shadbolt launched forth; and she said, "Well then, if you are so very anxious that I should keep myself respectable, pray do your best to keep up my respectability. Don't call the servant-girl *my dear*——"

"Nor yet chuck her under the chin," added Mr. Shadbolt.

"You don't mean to say you've done it?" cried the Frenchwoman in alarm.

"Done it? Oh, dear me, no! not for the world! Besides, the girl is too ready with her hand in slapping one's face——"

"Then you *have* taken liberties with her!" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "Now really this is too bad——"

"Pray don't entertain such an evil opinion of your devoted friend honest Ike Shadbolt. I only meant that she looks like a girl who *would* slap a fellow's face——But hush! mum!—here she is!"

The lunch was accordingly brought in; and it was now quite edifying to observe the curious manner in which Mr. Shadbolt endeavoured to look grave, serious, and well-conducted—pursing up his mouth, and only furtively leering from the corner of his eyes at Madame Angelique and Jane to mark the effect which he produced. When the pretty maid-servant had retired, he indemnified himself for three minutes' seriousness by five minutes' laughter; and then he began to pay his respects to the cold chicken, the ham, and the Madeira.

"Talking about respectability," continued Mr. Shadbolt, "I highly approve of your determination to maintain that respectability here. People in a certain class of life can't get on without it. Take your grocer, for instance, who all the week has been selling sugar mixed with sand, sloe leaves for tea, chichory for coffee, turmeric for mustard, ground bones for arrow-root, and every other kind of abomination: but he goes to church on Sunday, and is, of course, a most respectable man. It is the same with everything else——"

"No doubt," said Madame Angelique, again smiling.

"But I tell you what I should advise you to do," resumed Shadbolt. "Just send a twenty pound note to some Missionary Society—that one of Choker's, for instance——"

"No—I am not quite such a fool as all that," replied Madame Angelique. "I think I shall establish my respectability in this neighbourhood on a very sure basis without any such ridiculous proceeding. By the bye, I was going to ask you——"

"Ask me anything, my dear madam," interjected Shadbolt, "except to give up this bottle of Madeira until I have sent the last glass of it down my throat."

"I was going to ask you who that Captain Cartwright really is, that you introduced to me, and who managed those affairs so admirably?"

"He really was once a Captain in the army," replied Shadbolt: "but he sold out and ran through all his money. Then he became a regular man upon the town—living on his wits—until a few years ago, when he visited Paris; and there he got in gaol for debt. Afterwards he returned to London, and became a secret spy of the Home Office."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Madame Angelique. "A spy of the English Home Office?" she cried incredulously.

"Yes, to be sure," responded Shadbolt. "If you ever read the newspapers, you will see that every year twenty or thirty thousand pounds—I forget exactly how much—are voted for what is called Secret Service Money: and what do you think secret service money is for except for the employment of spies and all that sort of thing? Why, there's never a political meeting held by the working-classes but what the secret spies of government are present; and when anything very strong or very seditious is said, the spies always cheer the loudest."

"You astonish me!" said Madame Angelique.

"It's nevertheless a fact," replied Mr. Shadbolt: "and the reason's clear enough. The government likes to give a certain colour to the working-class meetings, because it frightens the middle-classes and makes them stick all the closer to the aristocracy."

"To be sure! *Now* I understand!" said Madame Angelique. "But this Captain Cartwright of whom we were speaking——"

"He got into disgrace somehow or another with the government," continued Shadbolt: "I think it was for not swearing strong enough at a political trial some time back; and so he got his discharge. Then he took to living on his wits again; and so the business we have lately put into his hand has been a splendid windfall for him."

While thus discoursing, the luncheon progressed; and when Madame Angelique had imbibed three or four glasses of the fine old Madeira, she began to feel less antipathy towards Shadbolt than she was wont to experience at times when she was not under any artificial influence. The idea strengthened in her mind that though she already possessed riches, she might as well double their amount; and that as circumstances had thrown in her way so willing an instrument as this man, she might just as well render him still more useful. Accordingly, after having partaken of another glass, Madame Angelique said, "Well, Mr. Shadbolt, everything considered, I mean to adopt the proposal you made to me just now."

"I knew you would," responded this individual, who, during a brief pause in the discourse, had been making immense inroads upon the comestibles as well as upon the fluids. "The sooner we make a beginning, the better."

Madame Angelique reflected for a few minutes; and after enumerating several names in her own mind, she at length stopped at one the recollection of which appeared to give her great satisfaction.

"Yes—this is a sure card," she said, now giving audible expression to her thoughts. "You have nothing to do but present the note, which I will immediately write."

"And who is the lady?" asked Mr. Shadbolt.

Madame Angelique did not respond to the question: but placing herself at a writing-table near the window, she penned a note.

"Now, Mr. Shadbolt," she said, when she had folded, sealed, and addressed the billet; "if you think you are sober enough, after all that wine, to conduct the business properly, you may at once set about making your first experiment. Balham Hill is at no great distance: you can find some vehicle to take you thither——"

"I will proceed on this mission at once," exclaimed Mr. Shadbolt, who was eager to begin. "As for being sober enough, the more I drink the better fitted I am for business."

Thus speaking, he received the note from the Frenchwoman's hand; and surveyed the address.

"Lady Anastatia Latham," said Mr. Shadbolt examining the note with a critical eye. "Very prettily written—accurately folded—the paper of a neat pale pink—the seal delicate and well formed —just such a billet as is worthy to be borne by so polished a gentleman as honest Ike Shadbolt."

With these words he stuck his hat airily and jauntily upon one side of his head; and pausing at the luncheon-table for a few moments to toss off another glass of wine, he took his departure.

Madame Angelique resumed her reading of the French papers and fashion-books for some little while, until she thought it time to ascend to her dressing-room and perform her toilet: for she was as yet in deshabillée. In the meanwhile the carriage was ordered to be gotten in readiness to take her out for a drive: but it occurred that when she herself was dressed, the equipage was not quite prepared for her reception. Madame Angelique accordingly strolled in the little garden which separated the villa from the main road; and as she was passing by the gate, she perceived a person whom she took to be a poor Lascar sailor, walking slowly along. Just at that instant an open carriage, filled with ladies, was approaching from a short distance; and Madame Angelique's quick eye at once recognised them as a genteel family dwelling in the neighbourhood, and who occupied the pew next to her own at church. But this family had not called upon Madame Angelique; and the ex-milliner was very anxious to win their good opinions. Here therefore was an opportunity to display her charity: here was an occasion to prove that if she possessed wealth she knew how to use it for the relief of her suffering fellow-creatures. Pausing at the gate, she beckoned the Lascar to approach,—at the same time that she drew forth her purse.

"You seem to be suffering very much from fatigue, my poor man," she said, speaking in English, and holding a half-crown over the gate at the very instant that the carriage with the ladies rolled past.

The Lascar only shook his head—but said nothing. Madame Angelique then addessed him in French: but still no reply—and only a shake of the head. She gave him the money: but as he took it, it struck her that a more savage, sinister-looking rascal she had not seen for a very long time. He made an awkward bow, and continued his way. Madame Angelique's carriage was now in readiness; and she rode forth for her airing. She had not proceeded very far when a gentleman on horseback rode hastily past the carriage, proceeding in the same direction which the equipage itself was taking. The ex-milliner at once recognised the Duke of Marchmont, though it did not seem as if the nobleman himself was aware whose dashing turn-out he was thus passing. He was unattended by any groom; and Madame Angelique said to herself, "His Grace is bent on some mischief, I'll be bound!—or else he would not be thus alone. Doubtless he is after some fair one? Ah, he will miss my assistance and intervention in such matters—as will a great many other persons likewise!"

The carriage having proceeded for about three miles along the main road, turned into a lane, so that by a circuitous route it might regain the villa,—thereby diversifying the excursion, and enabling Madame Angelique to enjoy the freshness of the breeze that was wafted through the foliage of the shady lanes along which the equipage was now proceeding. All of a sudden the carriage passed a spot where Madame Angelique caught sight of the Lascar whom she had relieved, and who was now talking to a gentleman on horseback. This horseman she also recognised:—he was the Duke of Marchmont.

The ex-milliner was struck by the singularity of the circumstance. Neither the Lascar nor the Duke had recognised herself as the equipage swept by; and she had distinctly heard the Lascar speaking at the moment—though what he was saying she could not distinguish. To herself he had been unable—or at least had affected to be unable to speak either English or French: whereas with the Duke of Marchmont he was now in discourse. And then too, could it be possible that the Duke was merely inspired by charitable motives to stop and talk to the man?—was he after all riding about that neighbourhood for his pleasure, without any settled purpose?—and was the meeting with this Lascar as purely accidental, as casual, and as aimless, as it might have been with any other beggar. No: Madame Angelique was perfectly convinced that such was *not* the case. What, then, could it all mean? She was bewildered—she was lost in conjecture: her curiosity was excited—but she had no means of gratifying it.

It was verging towards five o'clock when this little incident took place: the drive was nearly at an end—and the villa was at no great distance. The equipage was nearing the point where the lane turned into the main road,—when the sounds of a galloping horse were heard; and in a few moments a riderless steed swept past. It came from behind—therefore from the same direction where the Duke and the Lascar had been seen together: and what was more, Madame Angelique felt convinced that it was his Grace's horse which she had just beheld.

The carriage stopped—the footman leaped down from his seat next to the coachman—and coming up to the window, he said, "I fear, ma'am, there's been some accident. It strikes me it was the horse of that gentleman whom we saw in the lane——"

"The very same idea struck me!" said the ex-milliner. "Let us go back as quick as possible! —the unfortunate gentleman may have been thrown!"

Madame Angelique—being impressed with the conviction that the Duke of Marchmont was engaged in some private business, most probably of a character which he would rather not have pryed and penetrated into—had forborne from mentioning his rank and her own knowledge of who he was. The equipage had to pass out into the road before it could turn to retrace its way along the lane; and this caused some little delay. But presently it was returning in the direction whence it had previously come: while Madame Angelique from the windows, and the servants from the box, were looking out in expectation of beholding the thrown horseman. On went the equipage,—until at length ejaculations burst from the lips of the domestics on the box; and in a few moments the carriage stopped at the very place where the ex-milliner remembered to have seen the Duke and the Lascar talking together.

And there lay the Duke of Marchmont, stretched upon the ground, close by a gate against which the Lascar was leaning when seen in discourse with his lordship. Down sprang the servants from the box; and the ex-milliner alighted from the carriage. The Duke was found to be insensible: indeed at first they thought he was dead: but in a few minutes they ascertained that he was merely stunned.

"This looks uncommon like a violent blow, dealt with a bludgeon," said the footman, directing attention to the marks of a severe contusion upon the temple.

"There's no doubt of it!" said the coachman. "That Lascar scoundrel must have knocked the poor gentleman from his horse: because this is the very spot where we saw them talking just now—and it isn't to be supposed that the horse threw the gentleman off all of a sudden before he had moved an inch away from the place."

"Convey him into the carriage," said Madame Angelique: "we have no means of restoring him here—we will take him to the villa."

"And what about that rascally Lascar, ma'am?" inquired the footman.

"What *can* be done?" said Madame Angelique. "The fellow is doubtless at some distance by this time——Besides, our first consideration is for this gentleman——"

"He looks a person of distinction," observed the footman, as he assisted the coachman to convey the inanimate form of the Duke into the carriage.

"Now make haste home!" said Madame Angelique, as she settled herself inside in such a way as to sustain the head of the unconscious Marchmont.

The domestics sprang up to the box; and the lane happened fortunately to be at this part wide enough for the equipage to turn. It proceeded rapidly along towards the villa; and in the meanwhile Madame Angelique did her best to recover the Duke by fanning his countenance with her kerchief. His chest began to heave—slowly at first—then with more rapidly consecutive convulsions: his painful gaspings appeared to be bringing back the vital breath, and setting the respiratory functions to work. He opened his eyes for a moment—but closed them again,—evidently without having comprehended where he was, nor who was with him.

In a few minutes his lips began to waver; and he murmured some words. They were incoherent, save and except in reference to *one* word—and that was a name—the name of his long-lost brother Bertram! Madame Angelique listened with the suspenseful curiosity of one who expected to hear something more, and who had a sort of vague presentiment that it would be of importance,—though without at all anticipating what its nature might be, or why she should have that impression. Her eyes were intently fixed upon the Duke's countenance—which was very pale. His own eyes were closed: the mark of the contusion, and of abrasion likewise, was now more plainly visible than at first: it was evidently the result of a very fierce and savage blow which had deprived the Duke of consciousness—and most probably, as the domestics had surmised, knocked him from his horse.

Again was there a wavering of the lips: again did he give utterance to some words; and though his speech continued incoherent, yet were the words themselves audible as well as intelligible. Madame Angelique started: feelings of mingled wonderment, dismay, and horror seized upon her; and the very expression which they gave to her countenance, suddenly congealed as it were there,—remaining fixed and rigid upon her features. Her breath was suspended as she continued to listen with the profoundest, awfullest interest.

Again the Duke spoke,—his frame now writhing with the pangs which frequently accompany returning consciousness after a state of insensibility; and at the same time too it appeared as if these physical pains engendered mental ones, blending therewith in a strong convulsing agony. Under these joint influences did the Duke continue speaking—incoherently, but distinctly audible: and with increasing astoundment did Madame Angelique listen.

The end of the lane was now reached; and there it appeared that some man who was passing had caught the riderless horse. The footman from the box shouted forth instructions as to whither the man was to lead the animal; and the equipage continued its way. The Duke was now rapidly recovering; and by the time the carriage reached the villa, he was sitting up, endeavouring to gather his recollections—and endeavouring also to comprehend what was being said to him by Madame Angelique, whom as yet however he did not completely recognise.

Though the ex-milliner had now regained her perfect self-possession,—yet if the Duke were completely sensible, he could not have failed to perceive that there was a sense of appalling wonderment in her soul—visible even beneath the gloss of composure which she now wore. She had learnt a tremendous secret; and she was studying to have the appearance of one whose mind had not been disturbed beyond the excitement which might naturally be supposed to have arisen from the adventure itself. Just as the carriage drove up to the front door of the villa, the Duke recognised who his companion was; and this recognition seemed to give a sudden impulse to his intellect generally.

He was assisted from the equipage; and leaning on the footman's arm, he walked into the parlour. The man who had caught his horse was dismissed by Madame Angelique with a liberal gratuity: and the animal itself was consigned to the stable. The Duke was deposited upon a sofa: some refreshing beverage was administered; and as he was now completely sensible, Madame Angelique gave him to understand—without being observed by the domestics present—that his name and rank need not be revealed unless he thought fit. He made a sign to the effect that it would be better to observe caution on the point; and Madame Angelique soon found an opportunity of dismissing the footman and Jane from the apartment, on the plea that the gentleman was rapidly recovering.

The ex-milliner and the Duke were now alone together. The former explained how she herself had relieved the Lascar, who most unaccountably affected to be unable to comprehend her—how she had seen that man and the Duke in conversation together—and how the spectacle of the riderless horse had induced her to turn back towards the spot where Marchmont had been discovered in a senseless condition. But Madame Angelique made not the slightest allusion to the words which the Duke had so unconsciously spoken in the carriage, when gradually arousing from a state of insensibility.

"The fact is," said the Duke, after he had expressed his thanks to the ex-milliner for all her kindness, as well as for the prudential caution which she had used in respect to his name, "I took out my purse to give that ruffian relief—in the twinkling of an eye did he knock me from my horse—I remembered nothing more until I found myself seated by your side in the carriage. My purse, my watch, my rings are gone——"

"I felt assured you had been robbed," said Madame Angelique, "when in the carriage I noticed that there was not any jewellery about your person. But tell me, my lord—was there not something strange about that man—that villanous-looking Lascar?"

"There might be," said the Duke dryly. "You have a beautiful place here——I intended to come and call upon you——I did not exactly know where your habitation was situated—and little did I suspect just now that I was passing my old friend Madame Angelique's carriage," added his Grace, with a familiar smile.

The ex-milliner saw that the Duke did not wish to be questioned in respect to the Lascar, and she therefore said not another word upon the subject. There were other topics which she also avoided—although she might have touched upon them; for the presence of the Duke had conjured them up to her memory. She might have intimated her suspicion that he was not altogether a stranger to the murderous attempt on the life of Sagoonah at Bayswater: but Madame Angelique beheld no utility in discussing such matters; and moreover she had hoped, when retiring from her own equivocal avocations, that she might entirely wash her hands of all the perilous intrigues and machinations into which she had at one time been led by the Duke of Marchmont.

"I do not wish this little affair to become bruited abroad," said his Grace, thus alluding to his adventure with the ferocious Lascar. "It is troublesome to have the police set to work—and all that sort of thing."

"Nothing need transpire," answered Madame Angelique: "I will tell my domestics that you are a Mr. Cavendish—or Fitzherbert—or some other fashionable name—and that as you are immediately going on the Continent, you do not think it worth while to delay your departure for the purpose of causing a pursuit, which perhaps may prove ineffectual, to be instituted after the ruffian Lascar."

The Duke thanked Madame Angelique for her readiness in managing the matter according to his inclination; and under the name of Mr. Cavendish he remained to dine with her. By about nine o'clock in the evening his Grace was so perfectly recovered as to be enabled to mount his horse and ride home to Belgrave Square.

CHAPTER CXX.

THE LATHAMS.

The scene of this narrative shifts to a large and very handsome suburban mansion, situated at Balham Hill. This thriving district, in a convenient vicinage of the metropolis, promises to become completely fashionable, and to acquire a reputation on that score equal to Clapham.

Tudor House—the mansion of which we are speaking—was situated in the midst of spacious grounds, which had however been too recently laid out for perfect beauty, but which were nevertheless sufficiently attractive. Indeed, it was quite evident that no expense had been spared upon either the mansion or the grounds, by Sir Frederick Latham, the owner of the property. This gentleman was about fifty years of age—a partner in one of the most eminent mercantile firms in the City of London; and he was exceedingly rich. The house to which he belonged had enjoyed opportunities of rendering, at various times, financial services to the Government; and thus, while a Peerage was conferred upon the senior partner, a Baronetcy was bestowed upon the second. This was how Sir Frederick Latham obtained the title which he now possessed.

He had somewhat recently married the daughter of a noble but impoverished family,—a Lady in her own right: and thus his wife enjoyed the privilege of prefixing her Christian to her surname on all occasions—which will account for the fact of her being styled Lady Anastatia Latham. She was about one-and-twenty years of age and very beautiful. It was not however beauty alone which characterised her: there was something singularly interesting in the expression of her countenance as well as softly winning and unstudiously fascinating in her manners. Her features were regular, her nose being perfectly straight, the forehead not too high to be dissimilar from the style of beauty defined by the Grecian statues; while her brows were superbly arched and well divided: thus giving an open frankness to the whole countenance. Her eyes were large and of a deep blue, full of a soft lustre, which seldom indeed concentrated itself in the lightning-flash of strong passion, but shining with that serene steadiness and evenness which seemed to indicate the goodness, and gentleness, and benevolence of her disposition. About the mouth there was a singular beauty, not merely in its chiselling but also in its expression. Its formation was purely classical in respect to the upper lip, which was arched like Cupid's bow: the under lip was fuller and richer, but without conveying the slightest impression of sensuousness on the part of Anastatia. Her hair was of a rich brown; and of such luxuriance was it—with so superb a gloss too resting upon the surface—that it was no wonder if she generally wore it without any ornaments either of gems or flowers, but as if conscious that it became her best in the unadorned wealth of its own natural loveliness. In heavy tresses and in massive clusters did it float upon her shoulders, and form as it were a background for a neck of dazzling whiteness: for Anastatia's complexion was sweetly pure and transparent. She was tall and well-formed,—the contours of the Hebe combining with the slender graces of the sylph to constitute the perfection of her shape. In her toilet she was simple and modest—never seeking by means of low-bodied dresses for a meretricious display of her charms, nor caring much to avail herself of the sumptuous presents of gems and jewellery made by her husband for the embellishment of her person.

Such was Anastatia Latham; and we must now say a few words in respect to her husband. Sir Frederick was a tall man—somewhat inclined to stoutness, without being actually corpulent: he was perfectly upright, and carried himself with a certain stiffness,—which, together with his general appearance, impressed every one with the sense of cold formality on his part. Handsome he certainly was not: but he was equally far from being ill-favoured. His features were large: his forehead, exceedingly high and massive, gradually rounded off into the crown of the head, all the front of which was bald. Thus his iron-grey hair being worn away from that part, gave him a certain dignity of appearance, which by his manner he evidently strove to sustain. His blue eyes were of that cold expression which denotes calculating, business-habits: they moved steadily in their orbits—never turning nor flashing restlessly. There was something severe too in the expression of his thin lips, which if not actually compressed, were generally retained close and immovable—except of course when he was speaking. To look at him no one would give Sir Frederick Latham credit for genius, nor even talent: but at the same time there was a vast amount of worldly knowledge evidenced in the expression of that countenance. No designing man possessed of the least discrimination, would think of selecting Sir Frederick as his victim: wariness, shrewdness, and extreme caution were displayed in his looks as well as in his speech. Without knowing who he was, a stranger would say, "That is a man who never does anything inconsiderately, but who coldly and dispassionately weighs every proposal that may be submitted to him."

Sir Frederick was rich and exceedingly fond of money,—not however for the purpose of hoarding it, much less of spending it extravagantly—but to enjoy it according to the common notions of that enjoyment which money can procure. He lived handsomely—kept fine equipages—gave sumptuous entertainments; but nevertheless was always careful to assure himself that he was not merely living strictly within his income, but that he would have a large surplus at the end of each year. As he had risen from comparatively nothing, he was proud of his position. He scorned all civic honours, and sought to draw himself nearer towards the Aristocracy of the country. He would not have accepted the post of Lord Mayor of London for a single hour: but in his heart he was infinitely elated, though outwardly he showed it not, when he was created a Baronet. He would have held it as a positive degradation to become an Alderman of London: but he was flattered and gratified when placed in the commission of the peace for the County of Surrey. He was proud of belonging to the great Moneyocracy of England; and if he by shrewd and cautious steps strove to introduce himself more and more into the region of the Birth Aristocracy, he never fawned upon a lord—never played the sycophant—never forced himself unasked upon the society of great personages. Wherever he went in that patrician sphere, his demeanour indicated the calm self-possession of one who felt that he was by no means out of place, and that he was receiving no favour by being invited there.

Coldly calculating as Sir Frederick Latham was—endowed with common sense and worldly knowledge in the most accurate meaning of those terms—it may be a matter of surprise to the reader that after having remained so long unmarried, he should at length have conducted to the altar a lady who was young enough to be his daughter. On the other hand—considering Anastatia's exceeding beauty, her youth, and her accomplishments, her fascinating manners and her patrician birth—it may be also a matter of marvel that she should have failed to captivate any wealthy suitor in her own sphere. The dowerless daughter of an Earl and Countess—who, partly from extravagance and partly from the depreciation of property in the West Indies, where they had large estates, had barely enough to maintain themselves,—Lady Anastatia's position was one which had rendered fortune indispensable on the part of whomsoever she might accompany to the altar. Still there was many a rich scion of the aristocracy who might perchance have sought to wed a young lady in every way his equal except on the score of riches: but to the astonishment of everybody the fashionable newspapers one day announced that "Sir Frederick Latham, partner in one of the most eminent city mercantile firms, was about to conduct to the hymeneal altar the young, lovely, and accomplished daughter of the Earl and Countess of Fordwich."

And the marriage took place: nor on the wedding-day did there seem on Anastatia's part to be any particular sense of self-sacrifice—no indication of efforts being made to crush other affections which her young heart might possibly have formed. Her demeanour was serene; and those who knew her best, declared that there could be no dissimulation on her part—for that it was impossible the soul of one so pure could be infected with hypocrisy or guile. There were not however wanting at the time certain busy tongues to whisper that Sir Frederick Latham had rendered great pecuniary assistance to the Fordwich family, especially to Anastatia's only brother, Viscount Rushbrook, the heir to the Earldom. But on this point nothing was certain: that is to say, no positive details could be relied upon—though, as a matter of course, it was patent to everybody that the marriage was one of expediency on the part of Anastatia's family,—the great wealth of Sir Frederick Latham being the idol on whose altar the young lady was sacrificed—though she herself might possibly feel that it was no sacrifice at all.

This marriage had taken place about two years previous to the time of which we are writing. Sir Frederick was then building his palatial mansion at Balham Hill; and it was not finished until the lapse of some months after the solemnization of those nuptials. But when completed, Sir Frederick and his wife removed to their new home, where they had since maintained a sumptuous establishment. The aristocratic marriage which Sir Frederick had contracted, fulfilled the darling hope which he constantly though secretly cherished: namely, of introducing him thoroughly, and without any more cautious and guarded efforts, into the very best society. This was the real secret of the marriage so far as he himself was concerned—though the world suspected it not, because he had ever managed to conceal that *one* weakness which he possessed—we mean the yearning after patrician acquaintances. But as for his espousing so young a creature,—in the first place, the opportunity presented itself, and he had seized upon it. Secondly, his moneyocratic pride had made him calculate that his wealth was a fair set-off against Lady Anastatia's high birth—and that in return for the riches he could give, the borrowed lustre of her rank was a fair compensation. And then again, no matter how shrewd a man may be in every other sort of calculation, yet in respect to matrimony he never thinks himself too old for a wife, however youthful: his vanity will not permit him to recognise the disparity which others see: he flatters himself that he possesses every quality to command respect and secure esteem. Perhaps in reference to love, a person of Sir Frederick Latham's disposition might have treated the idea somewhat scornfully,—looking upon it as a mere piece of romance—well enough for schoolboys and puling misses to read about—but existing as nothing which ought to enter into those calculations whereupon matrimony is based.

Two years of wedded life had Anastatia thus experienced; and her lot did not appear to be an unhappy one. Those who had known her from her childhood, even went so far as to declare that she was perfectly happy. Very certain it was that she presided with the utmost amiability, as well as with cheerfulness, over the sumptuous entertainments which were so frequently given at Tudor House. There was always that interesting sweetness about her which, by a little stretch of sentimentalism, might be taken for an habitual pensiveness, serene without being melancholy; and thus perhaps it was quite natural for some to suppose that she had either courageously or else meekly resigned herself to the lot which destiny, operating through the medium of family circumstances and her parents' will, had provided for her.

There was no issue from this union; and Sir Frederick Latham was never heard to express a regret that he had no heir to his title and property. But because he said nothing, it was no reason that he felt nothing on the subject: he was a man who would never betray any cause of vexation—his pride would not permit him. He suffered himself not to be elated by joy, nor to be depressed by any circumstance calculated to vex or afflict. It was his study ever to maintain that sort of cold equanimity which was habitual to him, and which indeed answered so many purposes, alike in his business pursuits and in his intercourse with friends and acquaintances. Thus, even if he had longed with the deepest, deepest yearning for an heir, the world would not have known it.

We must say a few more words in a descriptive sense before we resume the thread of that episode which we believe will not prove the least interesting in our narrative. The reader will doubtless be anxious to know upon what terms Sir Frederick and his wife lived together. As there was assuredly no love on either side, there was no sentimental display of affection between them. Sir Frederick was as kind as his habits and manner would allow him to be: while Anastatia strove to perform to her utmost all the duties of a wife. There was nothing fond nor caressing, much less playful or uxorious, in Sir Frederick Latham's conduct towards his wife: but on the other hand, the kind courtesy with which he treated her, was never capriciously nor causelessly interrupted. He made her his companion, and in some respects his friend—but not wholly so: for he never spoke to her on business-matters—never gave her the slightest insight into the extent of his wealth—merely proved to her by his deeds that he *was* wealthy, and considered *that* sufficient. In respect to the mansion and the grounds, he certainly consulted her taste at times on a few minor matters—but always in a way that seemed to indicate that his own opinion was already settled on the subject. Nevertheless, if Anastatia happened to express a desire that anything particular should be done, her husband said nothing to her at the time; but the mandate immediately went forth from his lips to those whom it concerned—and the thing *was* done. Towards Sir Frederick, Anastatia was mild and gentle—because this was her nature: she was submissive without being servile—duteous without losing sight of her own proper dignity as a wife. As to the society they kept and the acquaintances they cherished, there could be no possible dispute between them,—inasmuch as none but men of known honour and probity were ever introduced by Sir Frederick, while Lady Anastatia courted only the pure and spotless of her own sex as her companions.

We may now resume the thread of our narrative. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of that day of which we have been writing in the previous chapter; and Lady Anastatia Latham was seated by herself in a splendidly furnished apartment at Tudor House. Some visitresses had just taken their departure: and Anastatia was resuming some elegant fancy-work which she had temporarily laid aside. Presently the door opened; and a footman entered to present a note upon a massive silver salver.

"Please your ladyship," said the footman, "the person who delivered this, says that he will wait for your ladyship's answer."

Anastatia opened the exquisitely folded, perfumed, pink-tinted billet which was thus handed to her; and she found the contents to run as follow:—

"Madame Angelique, having retired from business, respectfully solicits the earliest convenient settlement of Lady Anastatia Latham's account. The sum is 563*l.*, as per bill delivered. Madame Angelique begs to add that she has placed her outstanding accounts in the hands of Mr. Isaac Shadbolt, who is the bearer of this letter, and who will save her ladyship the trouble of sending to Madame Angelique's villa at Brixton Hill, by personally waiting on Lady Anastatia Latham on the earliest convenient day which her ladyship may appoint."

"There must be some mistake here," said Lady Anastatia, from whose cheeks the colour had flitted away for a moment, and to which the next instant it had come back with a deeper dye: yet her voice

was calm as she spoke—and it trembled not in the aintest degree. "Tell this person to step up."

The lacquey immediately retired; and in a few minutes Mr. Isaac Shadbolt was introduced into the room. In the meanwhile Anastatia had examined some papers in her writing-desk; and thence she had taken forth three or four of those documents.

"You, I presume," said Anastatia, in a calm, lady-like manner, as Mr. Shadbolt advanced into the room, "are the person alluded to in this note?"—and she held up the one she had received.

"Precisely so, my lady," was the response. "I am honest Ike Shadbolt, at your service."

"Then, sir," proceeded Anastatia, in a colder tone and with a more dignified manner—for it struck her that there was a certain approach to familiarity on Shadbolt's part; "I have only to inform you that there is some mistake in the matter, and which you will have the goodness to see rectified. Here are all the bills I ever received from Madame Angelique; and as you will perceive, they are duly receipted. Besides, I was never at any one time indebted to Madame Angelique in half the sum which this note of her's specifies."

"I see the bills, my lady," rejoined Mr. Shadbolt; "and I observe that they are all receipted too. But what is the date of the last?" and he peered impudently forward.

"A year back," said Lady Anastatia, who was evidently making an effort to command and preserve all the patience and civility which she was showing towards the man.

"Well, my lady—but then there's a bill since this last one," said Mr. Shadbolt boldly; "and it's that which——"

"No—you are wrong," rejoined Anastatia; "inasmuch as I have not dealt with Madame Angelique for a year past:"—and there was something bordering upon a calm, or rather suppressed indignation in the tone and look of the patrician lady.

"Ah, well, ma'am—it's all very fine," ejaculated Shadbolt, "for your ladyship to make this statement: but there is Madame Angelique's counter-statement——"

"I repeat, sir," interrupted Lady Anastatia haughtily, "there is some mistake! I will however look over my accounts, and see whether by any possibility there is one of Madame Angelique's which has remained unpaid. I am however positive that all the bills are here:"—and she indicated the receipted accounts which lay upon the table.

"And I am equally positive, my lady," responded Shadbolt, "that you *do* owe Madame Angelique this money—no matter whether an account has been sent in or not."

Anastatia had already shown more coldness and more hauteur, more indignant impatience and more proud dignity, in the space of a few minutes than she had ever done before: but it was now with the very haughtiest indignation and the very utmost of her indignant pride, that drawing her fine form up to its full height, she bent her beautiful blue eyes upon the intending extortioner,—saying, "This is the first time my word was ever doubted: and your conduct is bordering upon insolence. You can retire, sir. I will myself communicate with Madame Angelique in the course of a day or two."

"Very good, my lady," said Shadbolt, who was more than half inclined to speak with a still greater degree of insolence. "Mind you don't forget."

He then strolled jauntily out of the room; and Anastatia felt so hurt—her feelings were so wounded, her pride was so insulted—that she could scarcely keep back an outburst of tears. Not for a moment did she suspect the real purport of the note and the real object of the visitor—namely, that an extortion was intended: she firmly believed it was all a mistake on Madame Angelique's part, but that the ex-milliner had entrusted her business to a very rude person whose coarse vulgar manners were ill calculated to qualify him for such a mission. A being of Anastatia's natural gentleness and amiability, felt such a scene as this far more than a worldly-minded woman would have done; and the very effort of summoning up her dignity, as well as that unwonted display of indignation, were followed by a reaction, which, as we have just said, almost reduced her to the weakness of tears. Shadbolt had not left the room many moments when Sir Frederick Latham entered.

"I have just received a note from your brother, Anastatia," he said, "in which the Viscount tells me——But you look distressed? Has anything happened to annoy you?"

The question was put merely with that calmly kind courtesy which Sir Frederick was wont to observe towards his wife; and there was perhaps a slight expression of concern on his countenance: but there was no endearment of manner—no caressing encouragement—no solace conveyed in sympathising anticipation of whatsoever might be told him. Anastatia's grief was now suddenly mingled with confusion: and hastily gathering up the papers which lay upon the table—namely, the receipted bills which she had produced, and Madame Angelique's note which she had received—she swept them all into her desk—at the same time faltering forth, "No, no—nothing has annoyed me!"

"I am glad to hear it," said Sir Frederick Latham: but for a few moments his cold blue eyes were fixed steadily and searchingly upon his wife.

"You have had a letter from my brother?" she said, now partially regaining her self-possession: and at the very instant she raised her own eyes towards her husband's countenance, his looks were withdrawn from her, as if he would not for the world have it supposed that he was in any way surprised or troubled by the confusion of her manner and the singularity of her conduct.

"Yes—I have received a note from Viscount Rushbrook," continued Sir Frederick Latham, the calmness of whose look and manner completely restored Anastatia to her own self-possession. "His lordship announces his intention of coming to dine with us to-day; and as he moreover hints that he has a little private business on which he is desirous to speak to me——"

"I hope—I hope," murmured Anastatia, as if seized with some new cause of vexation, "that my brother Robert——"

"Do not by any means annoy yourself," continued Sir Frederick, in the same calm imperturbable manner as before. "It is not on that account I mentioned the circumstance of his letter. It was simply to learn whether you expect any friends to dine with us to-day——"

"No, Sir Frederick," responded Anastatia. "You are well aware that I never issue invitations without previously consulting your convenience——"

"You are welcome to do so at any time you may think fit," answered Sir Frederick, but more with the air of one who was conveying a permission than who was bidding his wife exercise a right which was indisputably her own. "On my part I have invited no one to dine with us to-day; and therefore it is somewhat fortunate that after dinner I shall be left alone with your brother——I mean merely because he intimates that he has some business of importance on which to consult me."

"I have not seen Robert for some months past," said Anastatia; "and I hope in the name of heaven——"

"Again I tell you not to distress yourself," interrupted Sir Frederick. "If it is a matter of a little pecuniary assistance, he shall have it. Thank God, Lady Anastatia, your husband is a man who can afford it, without the slightest detriment to his own interests."

"I know you are very rich," said her ladyship: and then, as she looked tearfully up into her husband's countenance, she added, "But it is really too bad of Robert——"

"He exercises the privilege of a brother-in-law," remarked Sir Frederick: and there might perhaps have been a faint—though very faint expression of irony in his tone: but Anastatia perceived it not.

"You have been so good to him—you have done so much," she said,—"and under such fearful circumstances too——"

"Lady Anastatia," interrupted Sir Frederick, without the slightest change in his tone, look, or manner—but with a sort of calmness, half businesslike, half self-complacent,—"I have more than once begged you not to allude to those circumstances. Assuredly, if I had thought that the conversation would have taken this turn, I should not have spoken of that part of your brother's note which hints at important business."

"But whenever my brother's name is mentioned," answered Lady Anastatia, "I am always reminded——yes, necessarily so," she continued with much feeling, "of *your* great goodness and *his* wildness—I may even say his wickedness. Never, never can I forget it! And at the time when our parents would not see him—when he stood upon the very brink of ruin—when a frightful exposure threatened him—when the gulf was about to open at his feet,—you, Sir Frederick, came forforward—not ostentatiously, but privately and secretly——"

"Stop, Anastatia!" said the great merchant: "this is sufficient. Let us allude to the topic no more."

If a very acute observer had been present—one intimately acquainted with the ways of the world, and skilled in reading the mysteries of the human heart—he would have been led to suspect, or indeed perhaps he would have plainly seen, that Sir Frederick Latham had suffered his wife to proceed to just that sufficient extent which ministered to his own vanity, and which reminded herself of the great pecuniary obligations under which her family laboured towards him; and that he had then stopped her just at the point where he might seem to have been listening hitherto for courtesy's sake, but beyond which to listen any longer would be perhaps to excite a suspicion as to his real motives. He now gave the conversation a complete turn; and shortly afterwards Lady Anastatia proceeded to her dressing-room to perform her evening toilet.

CHAPTER CXXI.

THE LORD AND THE MERCHANT.

SHORTLY after five o'clock, a very elegant phaeton and pair dashed up to the entrance of Tudor House. This equipage belonged to Viscount Rushbrook; and his lordship himself was driving it,—a groom in an elegant livery being seated by his side. The Viscount was smoking a cigar; and his whole appearance was of that dissipated, rakish, devil-may-care kind which denoted the spendthrift and the improvident one. He was five or six years older than his sister Anastatia: he was tall and well formed; he had dark hair, an aristocratic profile, and good features: but as we have just hinted, the traces of dissipation were upon his countenance. He was moreover thoroughly heartless and unprincipled: he would sacrifice a friend at any moment if it suited his interests, or if his pecuniary wants had to be supplied. He cared not for sister nor for parents: but yet he was an accomplished hypocrite—and at any time, to gain his own ends, could simulate the utmost fraternal love or filial affection. From his very boyhood he had been reckless and extravagant: his proceedings at college had helped to make considerable inroads upon the already dilapidated income of his father the Earl of Fordwich; and it was whispered that on more occasions than one had he since the attainment of his majority been compelled to leave the country for a time until his debts were settled.

Such was Anastatia's brother, Robert Viscount Rushbrook. When the equipage dashed up in grand style to the front of the mansion, the Viscount tossed the reins to his groom on one side—and tossed the cigar from his mouth on the other: he then stood for a few moments to admire his splendid pair of horses, which were steaming on account of the pace at which he had driven them;—and then he sauntered into the house. Proceeding to the drawing-room, he found Sir Frederick and Anastatia there; and as he had a favour to ask of the former, it was his policy to render himself as agreeable as possible.

"How are you, Sir Frederick?" he exclaimed, proffering his hand, and bestowing a very warm shake therewith, although there was nothing cordial nor fervid in the manner of his brother-in-law, but merely as much gentlemanly courtesy as he would have bestowed upon any other guest. "You're looking uncommonly well! And you, 'Statia dear—it is quite an age since I have seen you!"—with which remark the Viscount just touched his sister's cheek with his lips.

"Where have you been all this time?" inquired Lady Anastatia.

"Heaven only knows," responded the Viscount, carelessly: and throwing himself languidly upon a seat, he said, "'Pon my soul, Sir Frederick, you are making your place look quite charming. Such taste as you have displayed! Where the deuce you got it all, I can't for the life of me conjecture—buried as you were for so many years——"

"In the midst of that honourable industry," said Sir Frederick Latham, "which has given me the wealth that I now enjoy, and which also had its interval of leisure for the acquirement and the cultivation of that taste which your lordship has just been pleased to eulogize."

There was a certain admixture of pomposity, vanity, and self-complacency in this speech: but yet it was scarcely perceptible, with so much calm composure was it delivered. It likewise conveyed a reproof in an indirect manner—the phrase of "honest industry" irresistibly making the impression of the contrast existing between the pursuits of the great merchant and those of the young lord who had so often been dependent on his bounty. Anastatia felt that impression, though she did not for an instant imagine that her husband had deliberately intended to convey it. As for the Viscount himself, he either did not or chose not to comprehend the allusion; and he said with a characteristic flippancy, "Ah! it's a devilish lucky thing that some men can settle themselves to high stools and awful big books in a dark, dingy counting-house: but hang me, if ever I could have brought my mind to it!"

At this moment the door was thrown open, and a domestic in a superb livery announced that dinner was served up. Nothing occurred during the repast which requires special mention: we will therefore suppose the cloth to have been removed—the dessert to be placed upon the table—Lady Anastatia to have retired to the drawing-room—

and the brothers-in-law to be left alone together. For some little while Viscount Rushbrook went on drinking, not merely with the air of one who was much attached to wine, but likewise with that of a person who was priming himself, so to speak, in order to enter upon the subject which, despite his natural self-sufficiency, he had some little diffidence in approaching. He was moreover casting about for an opportunity to enter upon it; and this opportunity Sir Frederick Latham did not appear inclined spontaneously to furnish, nor to assist in developing. Indeed, the great merchant seemed as if he had forgotten that part of the Viscount's letter which had alluded to important business: he went on talking on general topics, as if there were no special one to be brought upon the tapis;—and to the young nobleman it was with a most provoking indifference that Sir Frederick told him how long this particular wine had been in bottle, and by what a lucky chance he had got possession of that other sort—and how he intended to make such-and-such improvements in his grounds—and how much his firm hoped to gain from the great foreign loan which they had just contracted for and taken.

"Confound this fellow!" thought the Viscount within himself: "he is only doing this to humiliate me. He won't help me to come to the point: he means me to open the subject deliberately and methodically, without letting me gradually glide into it! This is the cursed pride of purse, which humbles our patrician pride of birth! By heaven, how I hate him!"

As he mentally made this last ejaculation, Viscount Rushbrook held up a bumper of port towards the brilliant chandelier suspended over-head, as if it were to examine its colour: but he was really the while eyeing the merchant askance, and studying his countenance to ascertain whether its expression afforded a hope that the favour he was presently to solicit would be granted. But how inscrutable was that countenance,—with its calmness, half cold, half self-sufficient—and with a certain gloss of dignity over all! Sir Frederick knew that the Viscount was looking at him—but affected not to have the slightest idea of it. He could read, too, all that was passing in Robert's mind: but he afforded not the faintest indication that such was the case. At length Anastatia's brother fancied himself sufficiently primed—which indeed he must have been, if a couple of bottles of wine could accomplish such priming: but still he was very far from being intoxicated.

"Ah! by the bye, Sir Frederick," he said, "did you happen to notice that little sentence in my letter where I intimated that I had a matter of importance to submit to you?"

"I did note it," answered the merchant, with business-like precision. "I never fail to observe and I never forget any announcement which appears to be stamped with a serious meaning."

"Ah, well—that's all right!" exclaimed the Viscount. "I was afraid you had lost sight of the thing."

Sir Frederick Latham poured a small quantity of wine into his own glass—for he was habitually temperate: but he said not another syllable in response.

"The fact is," continued the Viscount, first sipping his wine, and then playing with his silver fruit-knife, "I am in a little trouble at this moment——I don't mean *trouble* exactly, because I know that's a term which frightens you City gentlemen: but what I mean is that such a thing as a couple of thousand pounds would be of the very greatest service to me. I should know how to use it——"

"No doubt, my lord," said the merchant: "everybody knows how to make use of a couple of thousand pounds—especially in these times when no one ought to *mis*-use money."

"Just so," said the Viscount: "precisely my idea!"—and again he filled his glass—again he fidgeted with the silver fruit-knife—while in the depths of his heart he thought to himself, "Perdition take the cold-blooded fellow! he *will* make me put the question point blank to him, so that he may have the prideful satisfaction of giving a point-blank *yes*, or the malignant satisfaction of giving as direct a *no*."

There was a pause, during which Sir Frederick Latham sipped his wine with the most provoking composure; and Viscount Rushbrook grew more and more embarrassed, confused, and annoyed.

"Well, about this little business of mine," he said, at length mustering up his courage anew. "It's only a couple of thousand pounds—I don't exactly know when I can repay it—but of course I would give my bond——and if you, my dear Sir Frederick, would put me in the way of raising it amongst any of your friends——"

"My lord," interrupted the merchant, with an almost chilling dignity, "I have no money-lenders amongst my friends nor acquaintances——for I never borrow."

"To be sure not!" ejaculated the Viscount, affecting to laugh: "that would be too ridiculous! —a firm that can lend millions to a foreign Government to borrow at home! No, no!—I didn't mean that! But I was only thinking that perhaps you could put me in the way of raising this cursed little sum—for I cannot think of asking you for such a favour, after all that you have at different times done for me——"

"Now listen, Lord Rushbrook," interrupted Sir Frederick Latham, settling himself in a business-like manner in his chair, and speaking with a dignified sententiousness. "You want two thousand pounds: and what is more—you want *me* to give you that money?"

"Give? Oh, no, no!" ejaculated the Viscount. "I mean lend——"

"*Give*, I repeat," continued the merchant, with a slight emphasis on the word: for it was rather his look than his voice which rendered that word impressive when thus reiterated. "Well, my lord, you shall have this amount——"

"My dear Sir Frederick! 'pon my soul, I hardly know how to express myself! You're a true brother-in-law——"

"And you likewise," added Sir Frederick. "I told your sister so just now in the drawing-room. But I beg that you will listen to me; for it is absolutely necessary we should have some serious conversation——"

"To be sure! This wine's excellent," exclaimed the Viscount: "I could sit and talk over it all night!"

"You will not think it amiss," resumed the merchant, whose lips for a moment expressed mingled contempt and disgust for the reckless dissipated flippancy of the Viscount, "if I enter upon certain recapitulations——"

"Do whatever you like, my dear Sir Frederick," exclaimed Rushbrook, who was now perfectly at his ease in respect to the loan be had asked for, inasmuch as he knew full well that his brother-in-law would faithfully fulfil any promise he had made. "'Pon my soul, this wine's capital!——But I beg your pardon—I was interrupting you! Now then, I'm all attention——By the bye, hadn't we better have another bottle before we go deeper into serious discourse?"

"Listen to me, my lord," said the merchant, somewhat severely, and without heeding the hint relative to the fresh bottle. "It was not I who first sought the acquaintance of the Earl of Fordwich,—nor that of his son the Viscount Rushbrook: but it was a circumstance of a peculiar character—or what other term shall I use?—which made me acquainted with your lordship's family."

"But my dear Sir Frederick," exclaimed the Viscount, now wincing visibly at the merchant's words, which seemed fraught with an allusion that was only too intelligible, "you surely are not going to recapitulate——"

"Yes, my lord," said the merchant coldly, "I am going to recapitulate. You ask me a favour—and I will confer it in my own fashion, or else not at all:"—then drawing forth a pocket-book, Sir Frederick displayed several blank cheques; and he added, "One of these will I presently fill up for the amount you desire, provided you listen to all that I have to say. But remember! I do not force you; and if you decline to hear me, I replace my cheques in my pocket-book, and there is an end of the matter."

"But my dear Sir Frederick," stammered and faltered the Viscount, "there is something very strange about you this evening. What does it all mean? I scarcely think it is quite generous——"

"Oh! if you take it in that light, my lord," interrupted the merchant, "I can only answer that perhaps it will not be quite prudent for me to comply with your request."

Thus speaking, Sir Frederick Latham made a movement as if to shut up his pocket-book,—when the Viscount, who had the most desperate need of money, and would rather hear anything, however unpalatable, than abandon the chance of obtaining it,—hastened to exclaim, "Well, well, Sir Frederick, be it as you will. Proceed! I listen."

"It was between two and three years ago," said the merchant, still with that calm, business-like air which the young nobleman felt to be so provoking, "that a bill for two thousand pounds, purporting to be the acceptance of the Marquis of Swalecliffe—a nobleman well known upon the Turf—and drawn by Viscount Rushbrook, came in the course of business into the hands of the Firm to which I belong. This bill was a forgery: the Marquis's acceptance was a forged name—and Viscount Rushbrook was the forger!"

"Sir Frederick!" moaned Anastatia's brother piteously. "What if any one were listening?"

"No one listens improperly, my lord, in my house," replied the merchant. "Am I to go on?"

"Yes—if you will—I am at your mercy——but this is indeed cruel!"

"It is a fashion which I have of bestowing the favour which is asked of me," rejoined Sir Frederick: and there was something coldly implacable in his tone. "Well, the bill came due: it was a forgery, as I have said: the Marquis of Swalecliffe disavowed it; and you, Lord Rushbrook, were stated to be upon the Continent. At all events, you were not to be found. Your father came to me in an agony of grief: I took pity on him: he himself could not pay the bill for you—a terrible exposure seemed to be staring you in the face. As for the Marquis,—he was inexorable: he vowed that justice should take its course—and that even though I, the holder of the bill, might arrange the matter with your father, he would expose you at all the Clubs—he would brand you as a villain. Then all of a sudden a change came over the Marquis. What influence was brought to bear upon him I know not: but doubtless the intercessions of your father and mother, privately made, prevailed. His lordship agreed that the matter should be hushed up; and I on my part agreed to exchange the forged bill against a note of hand which your father the Earl of Fordwich gave me. I need not add that it was the same as presenting you or your family with two thousand pounds; for until this day that note of hand remains unpaid."

"Not one syllable of all this have I ever denied," said the wretched Viscount; "nor do I deny it now. But wherefore, Sir Frederick——"

"Stop! you have promised to hear me," interrupted the implacable merchant: and he added with a cold sneer, "When our discourse is at an end, and I have filled up the cheque which you require, we will drink another bottle of wine of this very sort which you seem to like so well."

The Viscount's features brightened up in the faintest degree as he saw that the conversation on this topic must soon draw to an end, and that he would obtain the subsidy of which he stood so much in need.

"The circumstance to which I have referred," continued Sir Frederick Latham, "placed me on a footing of intimacy with your family. I became the husband of your sister; and at the same time I had the supreme honour"—here again he spoke with a cold sneer—"of advancing a few thousands for the benefit of your father. Nor was this all. Shortly after my marriage, you, my lord, became involved in fresh difficulties: you were outlawed for your debts: and every sheriff's officer in London was in search of you. Nay, more—there was one of your creditors,—a solicitor, who was also a money-lender,—that threatened you with an indictment for having obtained from him a loan under the falsest pretences; and again were you obliged to flee to the Continent—or at all events to hide yourself in some secure retreat. And who came forward to succour you? who settled your liabilities? who procured the reversal of the outlawries? who arranged that ugly matter with the usurious solicitor? In a word, who again saved you from ruin——nay, from worse than ruin—from utter degradation and dishonour? It was I, Frederick Latham, the City merchant."

"And did I not express my most grateful thanks?" asked the Viscount: "did I not, alike by letter and by word of mouth, declare that you were my saviour and acknowledge the obligation under which I lay towards you."

"No doubt," rejoined Sir Frederick. "But letters may be as insincere as bills of exchange themselves may be fictitious: for the man who would forge a name to the latter, would scarcely hesitate to lie through the medium of the former. And then too, as for verbal expressions——Ah! my Lord Viscount Rushbrook, I know the value of such language from *your* lips!"

"Why, what—what—my dear Sir Frederick," stammered the young nobleman, looking dreadfully confused, despite his characteristic impudence, "what do you mean?"

"Every fable has its moral—every string of truths produce their corollary," replied the merchant, sententiously. "Think you that I have entered this night into all these recapitulations for the purpose of parading my own generosity in a pecuniary sense towards your father and yourself?—or think you that I seek to enhance the importance of the favour I am about to bestow upon you,—a favour which however great it may be in reference to your present necessities, is in respect to my means and resources of the most trumpery and trivial description. No—these are not my objects. But I wish to let you know, Lord Viscount Rushbrook, that I am not your dupe."

"My dupe? Ha! ha! Sir Frederick, that is really too good!"—and the Viscount affected to laugh chucklingly. "It would be rather difficult, I fancy, to get the better of a shrewd, clear-headed man of business such as you are."

"It is the very thing of which I am seeking to convince you," rejoined Sir Frederick: "for if I give you my money, and if I have given your father my money, it is that I toss my thousands to you patrician beggars of Belgravia, just as when the humour takes me I toss my pence to the grovelling mendicants of St. Giles's or Whitechapel."

"On my soul, these are hard words, Sir Frederick!" ejaculated the Viscount, colouring.

"Doubtless they are hard words," responded the merchant; "but it is your own fault, and that of your father, if they are now addressed to you. I will come to the point.. The Earl of Ferdwich boasts that his patrician hand has been graciously and condescendingly pleased to grasp my plebeian hand. Such things as these is your Right Honourable father constantly saying; while your Right Honourable mother hesitates not to declare that her daughter was thrown away upon a City merchant, when with a little trouble and manœuvring she might no doubt have married one of her own sphere.' Mark!—*one of her own sphere.* It is easy, therefore, to comprehend what your lady-mother thinks of me. But with *you*, my Lord Viscount, it is infinitely worse. In your sober moments as well as in your drunken revelries, you have spoken scornfully of the City merchant. Have the words '*vain, pompous, self sufficient, upstart,*' never issued from your lips? But I will not dwell upon these things,—though I can assure you they wound me not; for I can scorn and despise them. I have said enough to convince you, my lord, that I am not your dupe. I know that in your heart you hate me: it is gall and wormwood for you to receive favours at my hands; and therefore, even in conferring them—and in giving you that which your necessities will not permit you to refuse, but which indeed they compel you to ask—I am revenged!"

Nothing could exceed the discomfiture of Viscount Rushbrook while Sir Frederick Latham thus spoke. The patrician dared not look the rich plebeian in the face. He was abashed—confounded—annihilated. But with the utmost coolness Sir Frederick Latham filled up a cheque for the sum of two thousand pounds; and as he passed it across the table to the Viscount, he said, "Not a word of what has passed need be repeated in the presence of Anastatia! And remember, my lord—when we rejoin your sister in the drawing-room, we wear countenances as if nothing extraordinary had taken place. And now, my lord, for that other bottle of wine which I promised you."

"Thanks for the accommodation," said the Viscount, now suddenly recovering all his self-possession and his flippant complacency. "But, ah! you have crossed this cheque—and I shall have to send it through my bankers',—whom, to tell you the truth, I have overdrawn to the tune of a few hundreds: so that they would intercept a considerable portion of this amount in order to repay themselves—which would by no means answer my purpose."

"Then come to me in the City to-morrow, and I will give you bank-notes," said the merchant. "Or stop, I think I can manage it in another way. Have the goodness to follow me, my lord."

Sir Frederick Latham rose from his seat, and issued from the room. He conducted the Viscount through the library, into a small cabinet, which served as a private office or study where Sir Frederick was wont to look over letters, or transact any other little business which he might manage at home, and on those days on which it was not necessary for him to proceed to his great establishment in the City. Drawing forth a key from his pocket, Sir Frederick opened an iron safe, which was concealed by a door formed in the beautifully painted and exquisitely gilt pannelling-work; and he took from that safe a cash-box containing a quantity of gold in one compartment and a number of bank-notes in another.

"Ah! I see, Sir Frederick," said the Viscount, with one of his flippant laughs, "that you always keep a good supply of money in the house in case of emergencies."

"Always," responded the merchant, with apparent coolness and indifference: but the proceeding was in reality another piece of ostentation on his part, to pique the envy of his patrician brother-in-law, whom he alike despised and hated.

When Sir Frederick had counted down bank-notes to the amount of a couple of thousand pounds, there was still a considerable amount left; and in the same spirit of ostentation, the merchant folded them up methodically—conducting the process in such a manner that Rushbrook might catch a glimpse of the word "HUNDRED" in the corner of some dozen or fifteen of these remaining notes.

"Shall I give you a little memorandum—an acknowledgment—a note of hand—or anything you think fit?" inquired the Viscount, as he thrust into his pocket the two thousand pounds just handed to him.

"It is really useless to spoil a good sheet of paper, my lord," was the merchant's coldly contemptuous reply, as he locked up the safe.

The Viscount affected to laugh: but he bit his lip with deep concentrated rage, as he thought within himself, "Insult upon insult! The purse-pride of this up-start plebeian is intolerable!"

While that expression of impotent fury was still upon Rushbrook's countenance, the full gaze of Latham's cold blue eyes was suddenly turned upon him—indeed with an abruptness that made Rushbrook start. But again recovering his self-possession, he ran his fingers through his dark hair,—saying with another laugh, "Now, then, for this bottle which is promised."

Sir Frederick Latham led the way back to the dining-room—rang the bell—and gave the order for the wine. As he sate for another half-hour with the Viscount, his discourse again turned upon general topics; and he spoke precisely as if nothing unpleasant had taken place,—while his demeanour exhibited that courtesy, so coldly polished, which was habitual with him. The fresh supply of wine being finished, the merchant and the Viscount repaired to the drawing-room,—where they partook of coffee with Anastatia; and the young lady had not the slightest reason to suspect that anything of a disagreeable character had occurred betwixt her husband and her brother.

It was about eleven o'clock when the Viscount's dashing phaeton was driven round, by the exquisitely dressed groom, from the stables to the front of the mansion. The night was very dark; and the lamps of the vehicle were lighted. Lord Rushbrook, having taken leave of his sister and his brother-in-law, paused for a few moments in the hall to light a cigar; and he then ascended to the box-seat,—receiving the whip and reins from the hands of his groom. He was somewhat the worse for the great quantity of wine which he had drunk; and the domestic, if he had dared, would have remonstrated against his master's undertaking to drive on the occasion: but he knew the Viscount's temper, and accordingly held his peace. His lordship was in rare spirits: he had the two thousand pounds in his pocket—he was elated with wine—he was proud of his beautiful turn-out—and the impression of the disagreeable scene with his brother-in-law having now completely worn off, he said to himself, "Since Latham never refuses his money, I shan't hesitate in future in applying to him even oftener than I have hitherto done."

The equipage dashed along the avenue towards the gates which were thrown open by the porter; and as the steeds flew through that entrance-way, the groom noticed with a shudder how closely the wheel whisked past the iron post. The road upon which they entered, was broad and even: the horses knew that they were returning homeward; and they proceeded at a rapid rate. The equipage had scarcely gone a quarter of a mile from the gates, when on turning a somewhat sharp corner, the phaeton dashed against a post, and was instantaneously overturned.

The groom was stunned, and lay senseless on the road: but as if the adage should be fulfilled which declares "there is a special providence for drunken men and children," the Viscount escaped totally unhurt. He was instantaneously upon his feet; and he fancied that a man, wearing some strange white dress, was at the horses' heads,—to which indeed the stranger had instantaneously rushed, he being on that very spot at the time—so that the wild progress of the animals was arrested.

"Thank you, my good fellow!" said Rushbrook, shaking himself as he sprang up to his feet. "Just hold on there for a moment while I look to the groom. Ah!" he continued, having examined his dependant, "he is stunned, but not killed. Well! that's lucky. And now for the carriage. Well, by heaven! this is lucky again! Nothing broken that I can see, except the lamps. I think those horses will stand now. Just come and lend me a hand to set the phaeton upright."

The man to whom these words were addressed, did not give utterance to a syllable in reply: but still he appeared to comprehend what was said; for having patted the horses's necks, he approached the Viscount.

"Why, you are a Lascar—or a Chinaman—a Malay—or something of the sort?" exclaimed Rushbrook, as the man emerged from the comparative obscurity: for the lights of both the lamps were extinguished—there were no gas-lamps in that part of the road—nor was there any house near. "Why the deuce don't you speak. You seem to understand me."

The Lascar made a sign that he was dumb: but he at once addressed himself to the business of raising the phaeton,—which he did in a very few moments by his own unaided strength. The groom was now recovering; and the Lascar, lifting the man in his powerful arms, placed him in the vehicle.

"You are a very useful fellow," said the Viscount; "and I can't think of giving you less than five shillings for your services."

Thus speaking, the nobleman thrust his hand into his breeches' pocket; and with that carelessness which was partially characteristic, and partially the result of his inebriate condition, he pulled forth all the contents of that pocket—gold, silver, and bank-notes. Quick as lightning the Lascar seized upon the notes: it was one rapid clutch which he made at them; and the next instant he was darting away as quick as his legs could carry him.

"Stop thief!" vociferated the Viscount, wild with rage and fury: but even before his voice had ceased to vibrate in the air, the white garments of the robber were lost in the darkness of the night.

A terrible execration burst from Rushbrook's lips: but he dared not speed in pursuit. In the first place, he was a coward: ideas of daggers and knives connected with that Lascar, swept through his brain;—and in the second place, he dared not quit the equipage. His hasty ejaculations startled the groom almost completely back into life; and he said, "What is the matter, my lord?"

Rushbrook was on the very point of proclaiming the extent to which he had been robbed,—when it struck him that if he were to do so, he must inevitably cut the figure of the veriest dastard in the eyes of his dependant, for not having at once pursued the plunderer. Thus, though almost maddened with vexation, his pride nevertheless inspired him with sufficient self-possession to make him hold his peace on that score; and he exclaimed, "Oh, it was nothing! Only the strange manner in which that fellow darted away after I had given him a few shillings."

The groom's thoughts were still too much in confusion for him to perceive at the moment that there was something strange in the business, and that his master was speaking evasively. When he subsequently reflected upon it, it was too late to put any further questions.

Rushbrook now inquired if the groom were very much hurt? The man responded that he was considerably shaken; but he congratulated himself on having broken no bones. The Viscount resumed his seat: but he drove very cautiously for the remaininder of the journey; and all the way homeward to his father's residence in Park Lane, he never ceased inwardly cursing his ill luck, which had deprived him of a sum that was so much needed by existing circumstances.

CHAPTER CXXII.

THE BRILLIANT ENTERTAINMENT.

FOUR or five days elapsed after the incidents which we have been describing; and Lady Anastatia Latham knew not precisely what course to adopt in respect to Madame Angelique. She had promised Shadbolt at the time to call upon her: but the pledge was hastily given, for the purpose of getting rid of the man; and afterwards Anastatia did not like to fulfil it. Equally distasteful to her was the idea of writing to Madame Angelique upon the subject of the claim made upon her; and thus these four or five days had passed away without anything being done. A grand entertainment was now about to be given at Tudor Lodge; and this was for the moment engrossing her ladyship's attention.

"You will see to-night a very interesting young couple," said Sir Frederick Latham to Anastatia, as they were seated together at breakfast on the morning of the day on which the entertainmet was to be given.

"A young married couple?" said Anastatia inquiringly.

"No—brother and sister," responded her husband; "and they are twins. Their name is Ashton; and as if all circumstances should combine to augment the interest which envelopes them, they bear the names of Christian and Christina."

"Perhaps it was a mother's pious love which bestowed these names upon her twin-offspring?" said Lady Anastatia.

"I do not know the circumstances," answered Sir Frederick Latham: "but I will tell you how it is that Mr. and Miss Ashton are to be our guests this evening, and wherefore I am about to ask you, Anastatia, to show them all possible attention."

"You know full well, Sir Frederick," responded the amiable wife, "that no expressed wish of yours is ever wilfully neglected by me. I will show Mr. and Miss Ashton every attention—not merely because you desire it—nor because mere ordinary courtesy would have prompted such conduct on my part—but likewise because I am already interested in this young brother and sister."

"I was about to give you some little explanation," resumed Sir Frederick. "There has been for a while past an Indian lady of rank staying in the British metropolis—but maintaining a strict *incognita*. By the death of her father she has recently attained a still higher rank; and large funds have been remitted to England for her use. These moneys were paid through our correspondent's house at Calcutta; and it yesterday became necessary that I should see the lady of whom I am speaking, at her residence in the district of Bayswater. There I met Mr. and Miss Ashton, as well as a gentleman of the name of Redcliffe. Having received the lady's instructions in respect to the large funds which our firm holds on her account, I ventured to hint that if it were agreeable, you, Anastatia, would call and pay your respects. The lady expressed her thanks, and with much courtesy gave me to understand that she was desirous of living in seclusion during her sojourn in this country. But she remarked that she by no means wished to condemn her beloved friend Miss Ashton to a similar monotony of existence: for it appears that Miss Ashton resides altogether with the Indian lady—while Mr. Ashton and Mr. Redcliffe were only the temporary visitors of a few hours. To be brief, I succeeded in inducing Mr. and Miss Ashton to accept an invitation to our entertainment this evening; and you may therefore expect them."

Sir Frederick Latham, as Indora's financial agent, had necessarily been made acquainted with her queenly rank: but as the matter was a secret, he—with the characteristic caution of business-habits—forebore from revealing the truth even to his own wife. He had striven hard to induce Indora to visit at his house. He had calculated that if she would only make her appearance for an hour in his brilliant saloons, the presence of a lady of such matchless beauty—even though her Sovereign rank should still remain concealed—would give an immense *eclat* to the entertainment. But Indora had declined,—not merely for the reason which she had alleged, but likewise because she deemed it her duty to bestow as much attention as possible upon the wounded Sagoonah. She nevertheless urged Christina to accept the invitation: while Mr. Redcliffe had by a sign intimated to Christian that he also was to respond in the affirmative. Thus, although Sir Frederick had failed to obtain the presence of Queen Indora at his mansion, he had nevertheless succeeded in respect to the young brother and sister, whose personal beauty was of so exceedingly interesting a character, and who could not therefore fail to create a sensation. But Sir Frederick did not choose to enter into these full explanations with his wife, Lady Anastatia: he never suffered her to perceive the amount of pains he took to render his entertainments so brilliant, attractive, and varied, that they should even excite the envy of the patrician guests who might be present at them.

At about nine o'clock in the evening there was a continuous line of carriages rolling along the avenue of Sir Frederick's grounds, and setting down the fashionably apparelled guests at the mansion. The edifice itself was a perfect blaze of light; and all the arrangements were upon a scale

which denoted an utter disregard for expense. Sir Frederick was indeed immensely rich; and the sum of money which such an entertainment as this might cost him, was an insignificant outlay when considered in reference to his means. The brilliant saloons were soon crowded with guests,—amongst whom were what might be termed the aristocracy of the commercial world, as well as a considerable assemblage of members of the patrician aristocracy itself.

Lord and Lady Fordwich were prevented by indisposition from appearing at this entertainment: but Viscount Rushbrook was there. This nobleman had for the last few days been revolving in his mind a thousand pretexts for making another draw upon the merchant's purse: but he had as yet failed to hit upon any plan which might reasonably account for an application following so close on the heels of the former one. Nevertheless, it was absolutely necessary for the Viscount to obtain fifteen hundred or a thousand pounds with the shortest possible delay: for not being himself a Peer, nor even a Member of the House of Commons, he was unprotected against arrest; and he knew that there was a warrant out for his apprehension on account of an unpaid bond which had just fallen due. To be incarcerated would prove his ruin: it would bring all his difficulties to the climax: his creditors—most of whom were now kept quiet by promises, or else were ignorant that he was in London—would flock around him like a nest of hornets. The reader will therefore comprehend that it was a matter of the most vital importance for Lord Rushbrook to procure without delay the wherewith to satisfy the creditor who sought to plunge him into prison.

He knew full well that although Anastatia was supplied with ample means for all her current expenses—and that though she might let him have (as indeed she had frequently done) such a sum as a hundred pounds—it was totally useless to ask her to furnish from her own purse the much larger amount that he needed. He dared not explain to his brother-in-law the precise truth of the adventure with the false Lascar; because he knew perfectly well that not for a single minute would Sir Frederick Latham put faith in such a tale—but that on the contrary he would be sure to regard it as the most shallow and impudent pretext for obtaining an additional supply of money. What course was the Viscount to adopt? He knew not: he was cruelly bewildered—he was miserably perplexed: he had no heart for the enjoyment of the festivities to which he had come; but he had made his appearance at Tudor Lodge in the hope that the chapter of accidents might evolve some circumstance which he could possibly turn to his advantage. Thus, if, for instance, he should find his brother-in-law in a better mood towards him than usual—if the gratified vanity of beholding a grand entertainment prove most brilliantly successful, should open the heart of the City merchant,—or again, if it were possible to induce Anastatia to plead on his behalf, devising some pretext for the plea itself,—Lord Rushbrook was determined to be ready to take advantage of any such favourable incident.

Amongst the equipages which rolled up to the entrance of Tudor House, was the carriage of Queen Indora; and this contained Christian and Christina. The moment they entered the brilliantly-lighted saloon, Sir Frederick Latham led his wife forward to greet the twins with a fitting welcome; and the amiable Anastatia, already predisposed to like them, was at once smitten with the conviction that her sympathies had flowed in a channel which would yield no future cause for regret. There was something so exceedingly interesting, even pathetically touching, in the appearance of this brother and sister—such a striking similitude between them—and their personal beauty was of so high and intellectual an order,—that it was impossible for any one who had a heart susceptible of right and proper feeling, to be otherwise than moved towards this young pair. Though their manners were naturally retired and unobtrusive, yet had they gentility's perfect gloss: every gesture denoted good breeding; and there was an elegance as well as a refinement about them which would have led a stranger to believe that they were the offspring of one of the highest families in the land. Christina leant upon her brother's arm,—her beautiful shape set off by a costume which was characterized by tasteful elegance; and though she had received costly gifts from Queen Indora and from Mr. Redcliffe, yet did she now wear little jewellery,—not because she herself egotistically appreciated the poetical aphorism which says that "beauty when unadorned is adorned the most,"—but because her taste in this respect was naturally simple. Her raven hair flowed in heavy tresses upon her polished, stainless shoulders; and as this was the first time she had ever made her appearance in so large and brilliant an assemblage, there was a certain flutter in her heart, which gave a carnation hue to her cheeks; and this animation rendered her beauty not merely interesting, but likewise brilliant at the moment.

Her brother Christian certainly never appeared to greater advantage. The evening costume which he wore—the black dress coat and pantaloons, with the snowy white waistcoat—set off the slender symmetry of his shape: and his dark hair, parted in natural curls above his high open forehead, enframed as it were that seat of the loftiest thoughts. No wonder therefore that this beautiful young couple—for the word *beautiful* is not misused even in reference to the masculine good looks of our young hero himself—should have created a considerable sensation when they entered the saloon. Sir Frederick Latham perceived the effect thus produced: he saw that the young pair had in a moment become the cynosure of attraction; and though he outwardly betrayed not what he felt, yet did he inwardly congratulate himself on the policy which had induced him to invite Christian and Christina to his entertainment.

After Sir Frederick and Lady Anastatia Latham had conversed for a little while with Mr. and Miss Ashton, the dancing commenced. Sir Frederick requested Christian to open the ball with her ladyship,—thus doing everything he could to put our hero forward as his principal male guest. He himself never danced: but Viscount Rushbrook became Christina's partner for the first quadrille.

This first quadrille was just drawing to a close, when Christina, on glancing towards the extremity of the room, caught a glimpse of a countenance which brought the warm blood up to her cheeks: but the next instant that colour vanished—and for a few moments she was exceedingly pale. This transitory display of emotion on her part however passed unnoticed; and the dance being over, the Viscount conducted her to a seat. He remained conversing with her for a few minutes longer; and then, as her brother rejoined her, the nobleman retired to another part of the room. Sir Frederick Latham almost immediately came up to discourse with the twins; and soon did the splendid band give notice that the next dance was about to commence. Christian was introduced to some young lady of rank for this second quadrille; and scarcely had he quitted Christina's side, when a well-known voice, speaking low and tremulously, said, "May I have the pleasure of Miss Ashton's hand on the present occasion?"

All the proper pride, modesty, and self-possession of the young lady immediately came to her aid, as she rose from her seat and gave her hand to Lord Octavian Meredith: for he it was of whose countenance she had caught a glimpse, as ere now stated, amidst the lookers-on at the farther extremity of the brilliantly lighted saloon. A sense of duty, having several phases—duty towards herself—duty towards this young nobleman who was the husband of another—duty towards that other, the amiable Zoe, who was Christina's friend—inspired the young maiden with a degree of firmness which made her heart glow with satisfaction at the thought that she should be enabled to command it. No change took place in her countenance: her hand trembled not as it rested in that of Lord Octavian;—yet *his* hand trembled—and she felt that it did so. For a moment her looks had encountered his own when she rose from her seat to give him that hand: but as he led her to the place which they were to take in the dance, she looked straightforward, yet without having any visible air of embarrassment or restraint. Nevertheless, although to every one else Christina's aspect and bearing were devoid of aught to create any particular attention—yet Lord Octavian felt as if his heart were riven with a pang: for to him this calm firmness appeared a proof of indifference. He said not a word for several minutes after he had invited her to dance with him: but still he had sufficient presence of mind to avoid betraying by his looks the feelings which were agitating in his breast.

"Little did I expect the pleasure of encountering you here," he presently said: and again his voice was low and tremulous. "I have mingled but little in society lately——I came hither tonight to distract my mind as it were from the thoughts which are ever agitating it——"

"May I inquire," asked Christina, "if your lordship has lately heard——"

"From Zoe? Yes:"—and he heaved a profound sigh. "I see that your brother is here," he immediately added, evidently for the purpose of changing the topic.

The circumstances of the dance suddenly interrupted the discourse; and when the figure was ended, Lord Octavian was evidently too much embarrassed to know how to resume the conversation. Christina therefore began to speak on indifferent topics: but her position was growing more and more embarrassing and painful; for by a kind of intuitive knowledge she comprehended what Meredith himself felt.

"Is it possible, Christina," he presently said, in a low deep voice, "that I have become an object of utter indifference towards you? You are scarcely courteous towards me—your manner is absolutely chilling——"

"I am incapable of behaving with a wilful deficiency of courtesy," replied Christina: but there was something in the quick look which she flung upon the young nobleman, which seemed to imply that if she did not absolutely resent, yet she at least deprecated his calling her by her Christian name.

"But why thus cold towards me?" he asked: "why thus freezing? Surely I have not offended you?"

"No, my lord—you have not offended me," she answered. "But may I beg that you will cease these reproaches?"

Again did the circumstances of the dance interrupt the discourse; and when it was renewed, Christina talked in a manner which as plainly as possible forbade any recurrence to that which she evidently regarded as forbidden ground.

"May I expect the pleasure of dancing again with you this evening?" he inquired in a tone of earnest appeal, as he conducted her back to her seat.

"I beg your lordship to excuse me," replied Christina: and the response was given with a firmness which again sent a pang through Meredith's heart.

"But this is most unkind!" he said, almost passionately, though in a very low voice. "At least we are friends? You do not answer me!"—and then, after a moment's pause, he added, "Christina, you will drive me to despair!"

"One word, my lord!" rejoined the young maiden firmly. "I cannot be guilty of so much ridiculous affectation as to pretend to be ignorant of these allusions: but I beseech your lordship to understand that I shall regard your conduct in the light of a persecution if you persist in it."

Having thus spoken, Christina rose from the seat to which she had been conducted, and proceeded to join Lady Anastatia, who was now conversing with Christian and two or three others on the opposite side of the apartment. In one sense it cost Christina a severe pang to behave in this manner towards Lord Octavian: but in another sense she was rejoiced—yes, absolutely rejoiced—because she felt that she had done her duty, and there was a glowing approval within the region of her own conscience. As for Lord Octavian himself, nothing could exceed the distress of mind that he experienced,—although he had sufficient fortitude to avoid the outward betrayal thereof. Issuing from the saloon, he went forth upon the landing, to obtain if possible a less heated atmosphere; for his brows were fevered and were throbbing violently. He passed on into the refreshment-room, where he obtained some cooling beverage; and thence he entered a conservatory, where he found himself completely alone. Here he gave way to his reflections.

Lady Anastatia Latham was conversing with some of her guests, as already stated, when a footman drawing near to the group, hovered a few moments about it, in such a manner as to indicate that he wished to speak to his mistress. She moved away from her friends; and he said to her, "Please your ladyship, there is that person—Mr. Shadbolt—who has called again and requests a few minutes' interview."

"Did you not tell him that I was particularly engaged?" asked Anastatia, the colour for an instant rushing to her cheeks.

"I did, my lady," replied the domestic: "but, to tell your ladyship the truth, he insists——"

"Enough!" interrupted Anastatia: and then, with regained self-possession, she added, "Yes, the business is of importance. I will speak to him. Where is he?"

"I showed him into the breakfast parlour, my lady," answered the footman: "for, to tell your ladyship the truth," added the man, with an air of concern, "he is the worse for liquor—and I scarcely dared venture to bring his message to your ladyship."

Anastatia moved hastily away: she felt humiliated in the presence of her servant. There was something degrading in the idea that she should be asked for by a person who came in a state of intoxication, and that she should not dare bid the domestic turn him away from the house. She was considerably agitated—though outwardly this excitement was scarcely visible to the crowd of guests amongst whom she passed on her way towards the door of the ball-room. She issued forth—descended the stairs—and proceeded to the breakfast-parlour.

Now, it happened that Sir Frederick Latham was standing at a little distance from the spot where that rapid conversation had taken place between Anastatia and the domestic. He had seen the servant hover about the group in order to gain speech with Anastatia; and he had marked that glow which had crimsoned her countenance. He naturally concluded that something wrong had occurred in the household arrangements, and that something might suddenly have been discovered to be defective with reference to the splendid supper which was to be spread in the banqueting-room. He therefore beckoned the footman forth upon the landing; and he said, "What has occurred to annoy her ladyship?"

For an instant the man looked confused, and seemed as if he would rather not have been questioned: but, as at a second glance towards his master's countenance, he caught the gaze of the merchant's cold blue eyes fixed steadfastly and searchingly upon him, he stammered out, "It is nothing particular, sir——only a person who has called on some little business——"

"Called on business at such an hour and on such an occasion!" said the merchant. "Who is this person!"

"The same, sir," was the footman's response, "who called the other day, when you questioned me——"

"Ah! the person who gave the name of Shadbolt?" said Sir Frederick: and though his countenance continued coldly impassive, yet was his mind inwardly troubled: for he had not forgotten the confusion shown by his wife immediately after that former visit of Shadbolt's, and which indeed had led him to question the footman as to who the individual was. "And on what plea did this person solicit an interview at such an hour?" he asked.

Again the domestic looked confused: again did he meet the cold steady searching gaze of his master; and thinking he had better tell whatsoever he knew, he said, "I informed this Mr. Shadbolt that there was a large party at the house, and that her ladyship was particularly engaged: but he insisted upon seeing her ladyship——and in short, sir, he said it was something about a debt for which he had to claim payment."

Now did all the proud blood of the City merchant rush to his cheeks: his lips quivered—his eyes glistened—he even made a gesture of rage; and for that one instant he betrayed more emotion in the presence of his domestic than he had ever before done. But in another instant it had passed; and in a voice that was perfectly cold and firm, he said, "Do you know to whom this debt is due, or what is its amount?"

"No, sir," replied the footman. "Mr. Shadbolt said nothing upon these points; and it appeared to me that when he did let drop something about a debt which he had to claim, it slipped out inadvertently—because, sir, to tell the truth, the man is the worse for liquor."

Again did the blood rush to the merchant's countenance: he too felt humiliated, as his wife had ere now done, that such a thing should become known to the menials of the household: but again quickly recovering himself, he said, "This must be some mistake: it is impossible her ladyship can owe any money. However, you will do well to keep your own counsel upon the point:"—and Sir Frederick placed a couple of guineas in the servant's hand.

The man bowed, and was about to retire, when his master said, "Go and tell your mistress that I wish to speak to her for a moment in my private room; and let this Shadbolt wait until after I have thus spoken to her ladyship."

We must now return to Anastatia herself. She had repaired to the breakfast-parlour, where Mr. Shadbolt awaited her presence. He had partaken somewhat copiously of wine—and haply of spirits likewise, after his dinner; and though very far from being completely intoxicated, he was nevertheless considerably elevated. He rose from his seat as Lady Anastatia, in her elegant ball-room apparel, made her appearance: but he had the air of one who was doggedly resolute in carrying out the point he had in view.

"What means this intrusion at such an hour and on such an occasion?" asked Anastatia, with mingled indignation and trepidation.

"Why, your ladyship did not keep your word," responded Shadbolt; "and therefore I thought there was no necessity to stand on niceties in this little matter."

"I will communicate with Madame Angelique to-morrow," replied Anastatia, with glowing cheeks. "I could not do so before."

"But your ladyship may forget when to-morrow comes, as you have done for the last few days—and therefore," added Shadbolt resolutely, "we had better settle the business off-hand."

"The demand is a mistake," she responded, "and I can easily satisfy Madame Angelique that it is so."

"And Madame Angelique says over and over again that it is *no* mistake whatsoever. Come, my lady—you had better pay the money at once, and avoid all unpleasantness. To be plain with you, Madame Angelique is determined to have it: and her resolution is represented in your ladyship's humble servant, honest Ike Shadbolt."

It was now for the first time that a suspicion of intended extortion flashed to the mind of Lady Anastatia Latham. The blood ran cold to her heart—the next instant it coursed like molten lead in its crimson channels. She knew not how to treat the matter—whether to repel the demand with indignation, or to submit to it and promise the money for the morrow. At that instant the door opened: and the footman entering, said, "If you please, my lady, Sir Frederick wishes to speak to you a moment in his study."

Anastatia was for an instant smitten as if by dismay at this announcement; and she was on the point of asking the domestic some question, when he said, "And perhaps, my lady, Mr. Shadbolt had better remain until your ladyship comes back to him."

Without a word Anastatia issued from the room: but when in the hall she put to the footman the question to which she had a few instants back been on the point of giving utterance.

"What does Sir Frederick want me for?" she asked, as if with an air of indifference.

"Sir Frederick questioned me, my lady," responded the footman: "and to tell your ladyship the truth, I was compelled to inform him that Mr. Shadbolt had called for payment of some little debt——"

"Ah!—then Mr. Shadbolt himself must have spoken to you?" said Anastatia: and it was with the utmost difficulty she could maintain an air of composure.

"He only told me that much, my lady," was the lacquey's response. "I could not help answering Sir Frederick——"

"Certainly not!" interjected Anastatia, with an air of dignified self-possession. "It was your duty."

Lady Anastatia Latham then proceeded direct to her husband's study, with the determination, if needed, of making a certain confession: but it was with a sense of dismay that she adopted the resolve. She entered the study—where she found her husband seated at the desk, and reading a letter with his wonted demeanour of imperturbable calmness.

"My dear Anastatia," he said, rising from his seat and advancing towards her, "it has perhaps been a little oversight on my part that I have not occasionally given you the key of this safe in order that you may replenish your purse without the necessity of applying direct to me. Here is the key: you can restore it to me presently. And now, my dear Anastatia, delay not in returning amongst your guests."

Having thus spoken, with an unusual appearance of kindness, Sir Frederick at once issued from the room. The whole proceeding was so completely different from what Anastatia had expected, that she was rendered absolutely speechless, and could not even murmur a syllable of acknowledgment for her husband's generosity. When the door closed behind him, and she found herself alone, tears began trickling down her cheeks. She comprehended it all.

"Yes," she said within herself, "he suspects that I am in debt—that I have been extravagant—that I have concealed my embarrassments from him; and he adopts this nobly generous course for a twofold reason. He affords me the opportunity of acquitting myself of my supposed liabilities; and at the same time he conveys a reproof for the mingled extravagance and dissimulation of which he deems me guilty. Oh, it is painful to be thus wrongly judged!—but on the other hand, infinite is the relief which I experience at not being compelled to confess everything! I understand him well. He will speak no more upon the subject: he will not ask me who are my supposed creditors: he doubtless thinks within himself that, touched by his generosity and goodness, I shall abstain from extravagance for the future. And I who have not been extravagant at all!—I who have even been enabled to assist my brother from the liberal sums which my husband has placed at my disposal!"

To this effect were the thoughts which swept rapidly through the mind of Lady Anastatia Latham; and drying her tears, she hastened to open the safe. But she paused ere she took forth the cash-box: she made a strong effort to conjure up her moral courage; and she said to herself, "What if I were now to defy these extortioners?"

But the moral courage came not in sufficient force to nerve her to that extent. She dreaded an explosion of Shadbolt's brutal rage; he might create a scene which would be fraught with a terrific exposure at a moment when the mansion was crowded with guests. She felt her own weakness; and with a profound sigh she drew forth the cash-box. There was a quantity of gold on one side—a layer of bank-notes on the other. She took forth sufficient for the liquidation of Madame Angelique's extortionate demand; and restoring the cash-box to its place, she locked the massive door of the safe,—thrusting the key into the bosom of her dress.

Lady Anastatia then returned to Mr. Shadbolt: and with dignified demeanour, she said, "Remember, I totally deny the claim which is made upon me: but I do not wish to have any dispute for such a sum. Here therefore is the amount. Of course you are provided with a receipt?"

"Here it is, my lady," answered Shadbolt, infinitely rejoiced at the success of his villanous scheme: and at the same time he drew forth the receipt from his pocket.

Anastatia examined it; and perceiving that it was an acquittance in full of all demands, signed with the ex-milliner's own name, she was satisfied. Shadbolt took his departure with the money in his pocket; and Anastatia returned to the ball-room. It happened that at the moment of her entrance Sir Frederick was passing near that door; she flung upon him a look full of gratitude,—at the same time laying her hand gently upon his arm, and saying, "You have this night done something which I can never, never forget! Here is the key of the safe:"—and she raised her hand to her bosom to take it thence.

"Not another syllable upon the subject, Anastatia!" responded the merchant: "and as for the key, keep it until to-morrow. We shall be observed!"

He at once walked away to another part of the room; while Anastatia—who was deeply affected, though she outwardly betrayed it not—repaired to a seat at a little distance.

Neither the merchant nor herself had noticed that her brother, Viscount Rushbrook, had been close by at the instant this exchange of a few words took place; and we may add that his quick ear had caught these few syllables which related to the key of the safe.

CHAPTER CXXIII.

THE SAFE AND THE CASH-BOX.

ANASTATIA repaired, as we have said, to a seat at the farther extremity of the room; and her brother the Viscount, after reflecting for a few moments, lounged round the apartment in order to join her there. He was revolving in his mind how to break to his sister the particular subject of his difficulties, when Christian and Christina approached. Anastatia's countenance immediately brightened up; and she spoke to the twins with as much cordiality as if they were long-standing friends instead of the mere acquaintances of this particular evening. The Viscount joined in the discourse as a pretext for keeping near his sister: but he wished in his heart that Christian and Christina would move away to another part of the room. It happened that while Anastatia was thus talking, she mechanically arranged the body of her dress—or rather the lace which trimmed it; and the little key fell from her bosom. It alighted on the flowing skirt of her apparel, and thus did not fall at once upon the floor, whence the carpet had been taken up for the sake of the dancers. The Viscount, who was lounging against a table behind his sister's chair, noticed that the key thus fell: the incident was however unperceived by Lady Anastatia as well as by the twins. For a few minutes Lord Rushbrook suffered the key to remain where it was, in order to ascertain whether his sister would immediately miss it: but finding that she did not, he dropped his handkerchief as if quite accidentally. Picking it up again, he took up the key with it: for he had so managed the fall of the kerchief that it alighted immediately over the key itself.

Another dance was now about to commence. Lady Anastatia, rising from her seat, hastened to introduce Christian to a partner; while some young scion of the aristocracy engaged Christina's hand for that quadrille. Lord Rushbrook was now at liberty to act according to the evil promptings of his own unprincipled mind. He felt tolerably well assured that he possessed the key of the safe. In the first place, he thought that he recollected it, as it was a key of peculiar construction; and in the second place the words which he had overheard his sister hastily whisper to her husband, strengthened the belief that he held in his possession the means of supplying his necessities. As for compunction, he had none: his only thought now was how to achieve his object without being observed or interrupted.

He sauntered through the rooms with a fashionable lounging air: he passed out upon the landing; and watching a favourable opportunity, he glided down the stairs. On reaching the hall, accident again served his disreputable purpose; for it happened that none of the domestics were within view at the moment. In less than a minute the Viscount was in his brother-in-law's study, where the light had been left burning after Anastatia's brief interview with her husband there. To open the safe and take out the cash-box was now the work of an instant. A hasty glance at the contents of the box showed the Viscount that they must consist of at least fifteen or sixteen hundred pounds; and he secured every golden coin and every bank-note about his own person.

On closing the safe—to which he of course returned the cash-box—he happened to glance towards the window, the blind of which was not pulled down; and at that very same moment it struck the nobleman that a human countenance was withdrawn. Yes—a human countenance which had evidently been looking upon him, and which had observed this act of robbery——unless indeed it were a delusion—a phantom conjured up by his own guilty conscience at the instant. Rushbrook felt the blood congeal into ice in his veins: he could not have been more dismayed if his brother-in-law had suddenly made his appearance—or if a police-constable had that moment placed a hand upon his shoulder. For several instants he stood completely transfixed; and then he rushed to the window. It was a moonlight night: the window looked upon a grass plat at the side of the house: no human being was to be seen—no gliding figure amongst the trees. Still there was ample time during the Viscount's consternation for any individual to disappear round the angle of the building; and thus because he saw no one he dared not come to the conclusion that no one had looked into the study.

Rushbrook was irresolute how to act. Should he return the notes and gold to the cash-box and drop the key somewhere? or should he keep his plunder and run every risk? Prudence suggested the former course—his dire necessities commanded the latter; so that at length—with that recklessness, half flippant, half desperate, which characterizes unscrupulous individuals in certain circumstances—he said to himself, "Well, at all risks I will keep the money!"

He stole forth unperceived from the study, and reascended to the ball-room. There, still unobserved, he dropped the key near the very chair in which Anastatia had been seated when it glided down from the bosom of her dress. He continued to lounge about the rooms: but there was a presentiment of evil floating in his mind: the possession of the money did not contribute to his happiness, nor relieve him from the apprehension that the mode in which it had come into his hands might be discovered. As for the countenance itself, he had no definite idea of it: he had no sooner caught a glimpse of it than it was gone: as soon as seen, it vanished. Yet that he had really beheld that countenance, he could not conceal from himself: he dared not flatter his mind that it was a mere delusion.

Christina danced the quadrille with the young scion of the aristocracy; and when it was over she was conducted back to a seat. Scarcely had her late partner quitted her side, than Lord Octavian Meredith rejoined her. He looked pale: but still there was a certain expression of decisiveness in his regards and on his lips, which immediately struck Christina—for an instant even alarming her; for he had on this night repeated that which he had said to her before—namely, that she would drive him to despair.

"Will you favour me with a few minutes' conversation somewhere?" he asked, in a voice which, though low, sounded strange and even unnatural, as if the speaker were under the influence of feelings tensely wrung—painfully wrought up.

"For what purpose, my lord?" asked our young heroine: and there was a tremulousness in her own voice.

"Not to repeat anything which you may not hear," he quickly responded. "My mind is made up! The resolution I have adopted will, I know, afford you satisfaction"—he paused, and added, "perhaps pleasure!"

Christina hesitated for an instant; and then—self-reliant, conscious that she had the power to perform her duty as she had already performed it an hour and a half back on this same evening—she said, "Yes, my lord—I will grant you a few minutes' private conversation, if you know where we can have it."

She took his arm; and he said not another word as he led her forth from the ball-room to the refreshment-room, where several other ladies and gentlemen were assembled; and two or three were at the time returning from the conservatory, which opened from that apartment. Into this conservatory Meredith led Christina: and we should observe that it was lighted with lamps—for it had been thrown open in order that the guests might admire the choice exotics, the fruit-trees, and the flowers, which from tropical climes had been transferred thither.

Octavian and Christina were now alone together in the conservatory; and the young maiden, gently disengaging her hand from her companion's arm, glanced for a moment at his countenance, as much as to inquire for what purpose she had been brought hither and what he had to communicate.

"Christina," he said, "I have profited by your own noble example. I will not tell you how much I love you—because—because—I have promised that nothing now shall flow from my lips to which you may not listen. Just now I felt as if there were despair in my heart! I came hither—I reflected by myself—I comprehended you—I knew why you seemed cold to me! It was your duty which you were performing. Ah! and you have awakened me to a sense of mine! Yes, my resolve is taken: every sacrifice shall be made for her who *has* made, and is still making, such immense sacrifices for me! I will not be outdone in generosity—in magnanimity. Christina," he added, in a voice which was tremulous, and so low as to be scarcely audible, "I leave England to-morrow——I set out to rejoin Zoe!"

"Lord Octavian," replied Christina, scarcely able to keep back the tears which ineffable emotions sent up to the very brims of her eyelids—"you are now performing the noblest part—you are taking the most generous course which you could possibly adopt——and heaven will bless you!"

"Alas! Christina," said Meredith, in a low deep voice, as before, "happiness and duty do not always go hand in hand!"

"Yes—you will be happy, Lord Octavian!" replied Christina, impressively; "because your conscience will tell you that you are acting rightly—and because heaven, which ever succours good intentions, will give you strength to perform your duties thus! You will go to the amiable Zoe—you will rejoin her—you know how deeply and fondly she loves you——"

"Enough, Christina!" interrupted Octavian, now with a gust of vehemence; "speak not thus, or you will deter me from my purpose!"

"Heaven forbid!" cried the young maiden, emphatically. "My lord, in Zoe's name I thank you for this noble resolve that you have adopted. And now let us retire hence."

"What! not another word before we separate, Christina?" said Octavian, again speaking passionately: "no word of hope—no word of promise——"

"My lord," she interrupted him—and it was now with a certain friendliness of manner, blending with true maidenly dignity,—"you have resolved upon a good deed: you are at length doing an act of justice: for heaven's sake mar it not by any weakness or folly now! Let us at once retire, my lord——And if you need one word—yes, just one word—let me bid you rest assured that you shall have my prayers for the welfare and the happiness of yourself and your amiable wife!"

"Christina, you are an angel!" exclaimed Meredith: "you inspire me with courage to do my duty! And believe me it shall be performed!"

Without another word, Lord Octavian gave his arm to Christina, and led her forth from the conservatory. She glanced furtively at his countenance, and perceived that it now had a certain flush upon it—a certain animation, as if arising from the heart's satisfaction at a strongly adopted resolve to perform a sacred, solemn duty. Christina herself was not unhappy: no, she was happy: for perhaps stronger still in *her* mind was the sense of duty; and the self-martyrising heart, when truly pure and virtuous, experiences a bliss in its own sacrifices. They returned to the ball-room; and there Octavian immediately quitted Christina's side. Encountering her brother he shook the youth warmly by the hand, and held him in discourse for a few minutes,—he himself now conversing with a manly calmness and self-possession. Christina subsequently explained to her brother everything that had passed.

Meanwhile Lady Anastatia Latham, bethinking herself of the key of the safe, determined to place it in some drawer or secure nook until she should have an opportunity of restoring it to her husband. She felt for it in her dress: but it was gone. For a few moments she was frightened: she thought she must have left it in the lock of the safe: then she remembered that she felt it in her bosom when about to give it back to Sir Frederick; and next she recalled to mind the circumstance that she had arranged the lace upon the corsage of her dress when seated at the extremity of the room. Thither she repaired: and she found it lying upon the quaintly-chalked floor, close by that chair in which she had sat. She now placed the key in one of the mantel-ornaments,—little suspecting however for what purpose it had served during the interval that it was lost from her possession.

At one o'clock in the morning the supper-rooms were thrown open; and a splendid banquet was given. We however pass over all details of the festive scene, inasmuch as therewith no incident is connected requiring special mention in the pages of our tale. Dancing was resumed after supper: but several of the guests began to take their departure Foremost amongst them were Christian and Christina. We should observe that Lord Octavian Meredith did not make his appearance at all in the supper-room; and amidst such a number of guests his absence was not noticed by Sir Frederick and Lady Anastatia Latham. Yet he had not quitted the mansion: he had no heart for the festivity—but he still lingered at Tudor House in order to breathe one last farewell in Christina's ear. He seized this opportunity just before her departure with her brother.

"God bless you, Christina!" he said, taking her hand and for a moment pressing it fervidly.

The look that he flung was full of unutterable emotions; and for an instant—but only for an instant—her own courage seemed to be giving way within her. But the next moment it was regained; and she hastily whispered, "Remember, my lord, it is in your power to achieve Zoe's happiness for the remainder of the time that God may permit her to dwell upon this earth."

Christina then quickly turned away; and taking her brother's arm, proceeded with him to the carriage; for their adieux had already been paid to Sir Frederick and Lady Anastatia.

We have said that several of the guests took their departure about the same time, immediately after supper. Amongst these was Viscount Rushbrook: for, contrary to his usual habit, he remained not to take his fill of the delicious wines which were placed upon the board. In spite of his mingled flippancy and recklessness, he felt uneasy: that countenance haunted him—yet dimly, vaguely, and impalpably; for, as we have already said, he had not the slightest idea of the individual's features—no definite notion of the lineaments of that face.

It was Queen Indora's carriage which had brought Christian and Christina to Tudor House; and we must here observe that the groom happening to be ill, the coachman only was in attendance upon the equipage. It was the first carriage to issue from the grounds of Tudor House; and while it was proceeding along, Christina was relating to her brother everything that had passed between herself and Lord Octavian Meredith. All of a sudden the carriage stopped; and the coachman shouted out, "Now then, my man, what is it that you want?"

A rough voice, speaking what appeared to be broken English, implored that whoever might be inside the carriage would give alms to an unfortunate Lascar sailor. The coachman gave vent to an ejaculation of impatience, and was on the very point of urging the horses on again,—when Christian, putting his head out of the window, ordered him to stop a few moments longer while he complied with the mendicant's request. At the same time the false Lascar himself came up to the carriage; and coolly opening the door, began thanking the young gentleman for his liberality. Christian, setting down the fellow's presumption to the account of his ignorance, drew forth his purse; and the chink of gold caught the Lascar's ear. In the twinkling of an eye he snatched the purse from Christian's hand, and darted away with the speed of lightning. Inspired with indignation at this feat, as audacious as it was villanous, Christian sprang from the carriage, and rushed after the false Lascar.

It was in a very lonely part of the road that this incident occurred; and the road itself was too narrow just at that spot for the equipage itself to be turned round in pursuit. The reader will understand that the daring robber had rushed away in the direction from which the carriage had come; and therefore towards Tudor House. Christina screamed as her brother sprang forth: but he was too indignant to think at the moment of her alarm, and too courageous to care for the danger which he might have to encounter. He flew as if on the wings of the wind in pursuit of the Lascar, whom he overtook at a distance of about a hundred yards from the scene of the robbery. The fellow turned round to face his pursuer, at whom he aimed a desperate blow with a large bludgeon which he carried: but Christian, nimbly evading it, at once grasped the bludgeon and closed with the plunderer. So well directed and so irresistible was this attack, that the false Lascar was thrown down; and Christian, wrenching the bludgeon from his hands, hurled it to a distance over one of the high hedges that skirted the road. The prostrate robber endeavoured to gripe our young hero by the throat: but Christian not merely protected himself bravely, but likewise overpowered the Lascar effectually. At that moment the sounds of an advancing equipage were heard: another desperate attempt of the Lascar to free himself was defeated; and finding himself foiled and powerless, he said, in unmistakable vulgar English, "Come, young feller, take your purse back again, and let me go."

But Christian kept him down until the equipage came up to the spot; and it proved to be the dashing phaeton belonging to Lord Rushbrook.

"By heaven! the scoundrel Lascar who robbed me the other night!" ejaculated the Viscount, giving the reins to his groom, and springing into the road.

"He is no Lascar, my lord," said Christian,—"but an English scoundrel in disguise. His speech has just betrayed him."

"Ah! is it you?" exclaimed Rushbrook, now recognising Christian. "By heaven! this is a bold feat which you have evidently performed! Here—let me fasten a hold upon the villain likewise."

Rushbrook, although naturally a coward, was now brave enough when he saw that the work was already done for him; and he took a firm grasp of the Burker's garments: for we need scarcely inform the reader that he was the individual of whom we are speaking. Christian likewise kept hold of him; and they made him get upon his feet.

"Well, I say," growled the Burker, "this is a pretty pickle for an honest chap like me to be placed in. But blow me! if this meeting isn't a queer one!"—then turning to Rushbrook, he added, as he looked him very hard in the face, "What about that there safe and the kesh-box?"

The Viscount's hands suddenly quitted their hold upon the Burker's garments, as if those hands were paralysed; and he staggered back a pace or two. At the same instant, by one desperate jerk, Barney released himself from the hold which Christian Ashton had upon him; and in the twinkling of an eye he had darted right through the hedge with the force of a cannon-ball. Our hero flew after him—but stopped short at the hedge; for it was a barrier which he did not choose to attempt the bursting through after the same fashion as the escaped robber.

"What did he mean, my lord?" demanded Christian, somewhat indignantly, and with still greater astonishment, as he turned towards the nobleman.

"I can't for the life of me understand," replied Rushbrook. "It was a sudden pain which seized upon me——"

"It is excessively provoking," cried our young hero, "after the trouble I took and the risk I incurred. But he said something about a safe and cash-box?"

"Did he?" inquired Rushbrook. "Well, I did not hear him—or at least did not understand. It was a sudden sickness—a dizziness that seized upon me—something at supper which disagreed with me——"

"It is indeed provoking!" ejaculated Christian. "So daring a robbery——"

"He robbed you, then?" ejaculated Rushbrook.

"Of my purse, which contained some twelve or fifteen pounds. For that I care comparatively nothing——but the annoyance of letting the ruffian escape——"

"Well, all I can say, my dear fellow," responded the Viscount, "is that I could not help it; and I am exceedingly sorry for it. I repeat, it was a sudden dizziness that came over me. And I say, be so kind, Mr. Ashton, as to keep the matter a secret: for people are so malicious in this world—they may put a wrong construction on the affair—they may pretend that I was afraid—and I should get unmercifully laughed at——"

"I really have no inclination to say anything

that could annoy your lordship," responded our hero; "and perhaps too I am not altogether satisfied with myself in having let the ruffian go. But what was that ejaculation which burst from your lordship's lips? Had the man robbed you?"

"Did I say so?" asked the Viscount, not being previously aware that in the sudden excitement of the moment he had thus betrayed that incident.

"Why, my lord," said the groom, now speaking for the first time, "it must be the same person drest in white——"

"Ah who *tried* to rob me the other night?" interjected Rushbrook. "That was what I meant! But one's ideas get so confused when anything of this sort happens——"

"Very confused indeed, my lord," said the groom, with a certain dryness which showed he thought that his master was not altogether speaking the truth in some way or another—an impression which Christian likewise entertained, though he could not possibly conceive what motive Rushbrook might have for such prevarication and self-contradiction.

"Well, at all events, Mr. Ashton," said the Viscount, anxious to make an end of the matter, "we agree to keep it secret. And pray, above all things, don't say a word when next you go to Tudor House—for my sister would be frightened out of her wits, and she would not sleep a wink if she knew there were robbers in the neighbourhood. I will give a private hint to the police to-morrow—and that will be sufficient."

Rushbrook ascended into his phaeton; and at this moment, Queen Indora's carriage, having been turned round at some distance ahead, came up to the spot. Christina was rejoiced to find her brother in perfect safety; and on his entering the carriage, he related to her everything that had occurred. They both agreed that there was something peculiar and unaccountable in Lord Rushbrook's conduct: but it was impossible to conjecture the motive thereof.

On reaching London, the carriage put down Christian in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square; and thence proceeded with Christina to Queen Indora's villa at Bayswater.

CHAPTER CXXIV.

UNCONSCIOUS REVELATIONS.

LET us see what in the meantime had been taking place at the Queen's villa. Her Majesty—having seen Christina off in the carriage, which was to take up her brother in Mortimer Street and bear the twins to the grand entertainment at Balham Hill—returned to the chamber in which lay the wounded Sagoonah. The ayah had for a week continued perfectly unconscious of the attentions bestowed upon her; and though Indora had no doubt as to some mischievous design having been harboured by her Hindoo dependant, she relaxed not from those ministrations which in the purest spirit of Christian goodness were bestowed. And there lay the guilty ayah, pillowed in a luxurious couch, with her queenly mistress watching every variation of her countenance—applying a cooling beverage to her lips when they appeared to be dry with feverish thirst—and devoting as much sedulous care to the wounded female as if she were a beloved sister whom Indora was endeavouring to snatch from the grasp of death.

Seated upon a small ottoman by the side of that couch, Indora fell into a profound reverie, as she gazed upon the sleeping countenance of the ayah.

"And is it possible, Sagoonah," she thus inwardly apostrophized the unconscious invalid—"is it possible that you could have been culpable of so much dissimulation and of so much wickedness? Methought that you loved me—that you sincerely sympathized with me in all I myself felt and suffered at the time you agreed to accompany me from our far-off Indian home to this western clime. But, ah! you cherished a passion for *him* whom I also loved, and whom I shall ever love so tenderly and so well! I remember a while ago—one night when I was expecting him to call at the villa—that I spoke to you, Sagoonah, on the subject of love: I asked if you had ever loved—and I fancied that you were happy in your supposed ignorance of love's pangs. But at that very time you loved him——Oh! you loved him!—and how you dissembled! Well, well, do I know, Sagoonah, that the human heart has no power over its volition; and it cannot shield itself against the impressions or the images which by destiny's decree are to affix themselves upon it. Nevertheless, Sagoonah, there are duties which in such a case are to be performed; and those duties were *not* performed by you! No—for you should have told me the truth, and I should not have blamed you——I should have pitied you. Yes—you should have told me the truth; and you should not have accompanied me from India. But you yielded to your own infatuation: you were selfish—you were egotistical; and in thee I have been cherishing a reptile who sought to sting me, instead of a faithful dependant to soothe and comfort me. I gave you my confidence, Sagoonah—I told you all my love for him! At one time I explained my hopes—at another my fears: seldom did I conceal from you my intentions; and all the while you were a traitress and a hypocrite!"

Indora heaved a profound sigh as she reached this point in her musings; and so deeply were her feelings touched, that tears trickled down her cheeks. Her heart was generous—her soul magnanimous; and as she had embraced the Christian faith, so did she possess the purest Christain sympathies. Thus, even while musingly addressing her reproaches to the unconscious Sagoonah, she felt inclined to pity her as the victim of an infatuated and hopeless love.

"Ought I really to blame you thus?" continued the Queen, still pensively apostrophizing the sleeping ayah; "or ought I not rather to look for as much extenuation on your behalf as circumstances admit? For, Oh! I myself know what the power of love is—what its impulses are—and how selfish it at times renders its votaries. My own life affords an illustration: and it is the only deed on which I have to look back with sorrow. Yes—for it was I who kept *him* so long a prisoner in that far-off kingdom of Inderabad; and it was cruel—it was selfish—it was unjust—it was barbarous, on my part! If I therefore have to retrospect with compunction upon such a deed as *that*, ought I not to be lenient in the judgment which I pass upon thee, Sagoonah?"

Here the Queen's musings were suddenly interrupted by a restless movement on Sagoonah's part: she tossed her arms uneasily, and turned her head upon the pillow, as if she suffered pain either physically or mentally—perhaps in both ways. The Queen rose from her seat and hastened to quiet the invalid. She took Sagoonah's hands in her own: she pressed them: then she passed one of her hands caressingly and soothingly over the smooth dusky-hued cheek of the ayah; and then she assured herself that the bandages of the healing wound were not disturbed. While thus tenderly ministering to her dependant, Queen Indora completely lost sight of whatsoever motives of dark misgiving and deep resentment she had against the sleeping woman: it was only the invalid requiring all her attentions that she at the moment beheld. And if anything were wanting to afford a complete illustration of the admirable qualities of Indora's character, this deficiency was now supplied by the unfeigned sincerity and unalloyed tenderness of her behaviour towards one who had proved her enemy.

Sagoonah appeared to have felt the soothing influence of her kind mistress's caresses, though mentally unconscious that they were bestowed; for she relapsed into a state of composure. The Queen was gently resuming her seat, when it struck her that some words were wavering upon Sagoonah's lips. She stopped short, and listened. Yes: the ayah was murmuring something; and this was the first time that a syllable had issued from those lips during the week which had now elapsed since the almost mortal wound was inflicted. It was evident that Sagoonah's consciousness was returning—and that as the lamp of life was regaining its power, it was beginning to light up the images and impressions that were most strongly marked in the cells of Sagoonah's brain.

Statue-like did Indora stand close by the couch—with upheaved bosom breathlessly listening to whatsoever might first coherently come from Sagoonah's lips. Again did the ayah move her arms, as if with a feverish uneasiness; and the Queen was about to soothe her with the mesmeric influence of caresses again, when the ayah spoke intelligibly and plainly, though feebly and in broken words.

"Yes—I did it all!—the wickedness was mine!" she thus murmuringly said. "But it was that fiend—the Frenchwoman—who prompted me! Oh, why did I listen to her? For all the plotting was against my dear good mistress—my mistress——the plotting——Indora——my mistress!"

Now Sagoonah opened her large dark eyes: she almost immediately closed them again; and for a few instants it appeared as if she were dead, so breathlessly silent did she lie. The Queen was alarmed, and placed her hand upon Sagoonah's bosom: but the heart was beating within. Again did the ayah slowly open her eyes, and look up vacantly at the countenance that was bending over her. Thus for upwards of a minute did she gaze at her royal mistress; and when she closed her eyes again, it was without any sudden glitter to show that she had recognised the countenance which thus bent over her. But once more did her tongue give utterance to feebly articulated and broken sentences; and once more did the Queen listen with breathless attention.

"Yes—it was that fiend the Frenchwoman—Madame Angelique," continued Sagoonah, "who did it all. Ah! that night—when I penetrated into the Queen's chamber—the intent was horrible—it was to take her life! Christina saved her! Yes—the English girl saved my mistress on that occasion—or she would have been dead, dead!"

There was another long interval of silence, during which Indora listened in a state of dismayed and horrified suspense for whatsoever might next come from Sagoonah's lips.

"Ah! that temptress—that vile, vile woman!" again murmured Sagoonah: "it was she who urged me on!—Oh!" and here the ayah shuddered visibly, and with a violence that shook the very bed beneath her, "how could I have touched that reptile? Its fangs might have entered my flesh!—its venom might have circulated in my veins! Ah, my poor mistress!—that day you took me to the gardens—the gardens—the—the——"

The rest of the sentence was lost in incoherent murmurings: but Sagoonah had said enough to send a light horribly flashing in unto the brain of the Queen, clearing up in a moment the mystery of that serpent's presence within the walls of the villa some little while back. Indora was shocked—appalled: the revelation was as frightful as it was unexpected. Sagoonah, conscience-stricken even in her unconsciousness, was thus giving a species of subdued delirious vent to the terrific incidents of guilt which weighed upon her soul.

"The messengers from India came at the moment," continued the ayah, in the same murmuring broken accents as before: "the reptile was in the couch—all was prepared—death was in its sting—venom in its fangs: but heaven would not permit my mistress to perish *then!* Take it from me—take it from me, that hideous reptile!—Oh, take it, take it from me! Oh, oh!"

Again was Sagoonah's form convulsed with a violent shudder: the bed shook under her—she writhed upon the couch—she half-turned round in spasmodic convulsion: again were her arms tossed and agitated wildly. This time Indora had not the presence of mind to apply her soothing influence: she was transfixed to the spot with the horror that like a night-mare filled her soul. This last revelation from Sagoonah's lips, in respect to the cobra di capello, was so frightfully incredible—and yet all circumstances combined to prevent it from being for a single moment disbelieved!

"That English girl—Christina Ashton," continued Sagoonah, in feebler and more broken accents than those in which she had last spoken, "is an angel in earthly form! She has told me of the angels of her creed—and she is one——she has spoken of herself! She is the Good Genius of my mistress: her presence is a talisman against all evil to Indora. No, no, vile woman!——no, no, Madame Angelique! I will do nothing more to Indora! Christina's presence saves her. Fool! you carry her off—but she comes back—she escapes from your toils—she is an angel—an angel of her own creed! Nor can you dispose of her as you will——that angel—that angel——angel!"

Here was another revelation for the Queen: the mystery of Christina's forced abduction was now cleared up.

"Yes, Christina escaped from you, vile woman!" continued Sagoonah: "she came back—to be the Good Genius of my mistress, who is kind to her! Oh, I will do no more to Indora! But that Englishman—the first whom I ever saw—the only one whom I ever loved——Ah! his image is here—here——*here!*"

Sagoonah turned uneasily upon her pillow; and with a low gasping sigh she laid her right hand upon her heart. Again she opened her large dark eyes; and she appeared to look slowly around with the vacant astonishment, half-dismayed and half-inquiring, of a young child who awakens in a strange bed and in a strange room. Indora bent over Sagoonah to see if she would be recognised: but the lids closed gradually, and with an air of heaviness, upon the ayah's eyes: the long ebon lashes again resting upon the dusky paleness of the cheeks. There was another interval of silence, during which Sagoonah appeared to sleep in profoundest tranquillity,—until her bosom began slowly to heave with one long deep-drawn sigh, and more words wavered murmuringly upon her lips.

"No, not love!—it is hatred now!" she said; "hatred, because he loves another!—hatred because he will not accept *my* love! Oh, wretched, wretched Sagoonah, to appeal to him in vain—to entreat and to threaten in turns—and all so fruitlessly! And *he* so cold, so reserved, so distant——Aye, and even so disdainful! But I will be avenged! I will leave this house, never to return!—Ah! my mistress has jewels and gold—I may be rich—poverty shall not clutch me with its long, lean, withered hands,—nor hover round me with its gaunt, squalid, emaciated form! Away, away to a magistrate!—let the blow be struck at once—a double blow—a blow that shall crush *him* and overwhelm *her* with despair! Yes—a blow that shall destroy both at once! There has already been too much of love: the time has come for hatred. But, no! not in this white dress of mine which marks the slave! Who will believe me? Then what am I to do? Ah, happy thought! apparel myself in the Queen's raiment—become a lady at once—go richly dressed into the presence of the magistrate—and then, *then* he will believe me!"

It was thus that Sagoonah re-enacted in her conscience-stricken unconsciousness — and in the fever of her half-subdued, half-hushed delirium—that last scene which had entailed upon her so frightful a result. Indora continued to listen with breathless attention, but with dismayed and horrified feelings. Everything was now revealed to her:—had Sagoonah made a regular and intentional confession, it could not have been more explicit, nor could its details have been more lucidly defined. The Queen saw that for some time past she had indeed been cherishing a serpent who sought to sting her: she had been standing upon a mine to which the hand of the false Sagoonah was at any moment to apply the torch; and she was horrified—she was astounded in one sense—but in another how grateful was she! And there—by the side of that couch on which the guilty woman lay, now silently sleeping once more—Indora knelt; and in the fervour of her Christian piety she poured forth her thanksgiving to the true God whom by Clement Redcliffe she had been taught to worship. Nothing more came that night from the lips of Saguonah; and Queen Indora retired to rest in an adjoining room. Frequently, however, during the night did this royal lady rise to see that the nurse who in the meanwhile had taken her place, was doing her duty towards the invalid: for notwithstanding that Indora had now obtained the complete reading of the whole sum of Sagoonah's monstrous iniquity, yet not for an instant would she neglect that being whom her own kind cares had saved from dissolution.

The Queen heard Christina return home in the carriage; and she could scarcely restrain herself from hastening at once to tell the young lady how all the mysteries of Sagoonah's wickedness were cleared up, and how the motive of Christina's forced abduction at the time was now thoroughly comprehended. But Indora resolved to wait until the morning; for she knew that Miss Ashton must feel fatigued after the entertainment from which she had returned so late.

The Queen did not suffer her young friend to be disturbed until she herself rang the bell for the maid shortly after nine o'clock in the morning; and then Indora, who was already up, proceeded to Christina's chamber.

"My dear girl," she said, "there are many topics upon which I have never spoken to you much, or at which I have only lightly glanced: but it is now suitable that you should know more of those subjects."

With this brief preface, the Queen proceeded to explain to the horrified and amazed Christina how Sagoonah in her uneasy slumbers avowed sufficient to prove with what murderous intention she was inspired, when penetrating one night into her chamber,—adding, "And it was you, my sweet Christina, who were my guardian angel at the time! Yes—Sagoonah herself has declared that you are an angel!"

The Queen then recited the ayah's unconscious confession relative to the cobra di capello, and also in respect to Christina's forcible abduction by the infamous Frenchwoman. But Indora said nothing relative to that portentous secret which regarded Clement Redcliffe, and which Sagoonah had intended to use as the means of dealing a blow of twofold vindictiveness. To all however that *was* told her, the young maiden listened with those feelings of blended horror and wonderment which such revelations were but too well calculated to excite; and as she threw herself into the Queen's arms, weeping and sobbing, she murmured, "Oh, dear lady! it has been heaven's own hand that has guided you safely amidst so many and such frightful perils!"

In the course of the forenoon Mr. Redcliffe called; and Indora communicated to him everything that had issued from the lips of Sagoonah on the preceding evening.

"Rest assured, my dear Indora," said Mr. Redcliffe, "that all the affairs in which I am in any way mixed up, are gradually but surely approaching a crisis. When any circumstances which it so deeply concerns an individual to bring to an issue, are thus unravelling themselves—when past mysteries are being cleared up as if by means simply accidental—and when a clearer insight is afforded into whatsoever was previously dark and uncertain,—rest assured, I say, that the end is not far distant. Have no fears for the result: I myself am full of confidence! My plans are working:—day by day are the meshes tightening in around those whom it is necessary or expedient to involve in such toils, and to place completely at my mercy; and the further I proceed, the clearer, the easier, and the more certain becomes the path which I have to pursue. Beware, however, lest Sagoonah should speak in the presence of that nurse——"

"I have taken every precaution," responded the Queen. "I have purposely told sufficient to Christina to render that amiable girl interested in watching Sagoonah's bedside at those times when I myself cannot be there; and the very instant that words begin to waver on Sagoonah's lips, the nurse will be dismissed from the chamber. Besides, as Christina takes her turn with me in thus watching, there is so little need for the presence of the nurse at all!"

The Queen and Mr. Redcliffe continued to discourse for some little while longer; and then the latter took his leave—he having business of importance to attend to in respect to the various plans which he had in operation. Christian called in the forenoon; and after spending a couple of hours at the villa, he hastened away to see his dearly beloved Isabella Vincent.

It was six o'clock in the evening—dinner was over at the villa—and the Queen said to Christina, "You have not been out to-day, my dear girl—and your cheeks are somewhat pale after last night's entertainment. Go and take an hour's ramble in the garden or in the neighbourhood—so that you may return revivified and refreshed, to give me your kind assistance in watching by the side of Sagoonah's couch."

Christina, intending to confine her ramble to the garden, threw on a large summer straw-hat, and issued forth from the villa. She had caught up a volume of poems before leaving her room; and on passing out into the garden, she endeavoured to fix her attention upon the book—but she could not.

Her cheek was indeed pale, as the Queen had noticed: but this pallor was not the effect of the entertainment only. The young maiden had been thinking of all that took place between herself and Lord Octavian on the preceding night; and though not for a single instant did she regret the line of conduct she had pursued, yet she could not help feeling the influence of those occurrences. She loved one who was the husband of another; and with all her sense of duty it was impossible to stifle and crush this love in her heart. Yet there was a serenity, if not an actual happiness, in Christina's thoughts, when pondering the intention of Lord Octavian to rejoin his wife, the amiable Zoe.

Christina felt as if the air of the garden did not do her any good—as if it wanted that elasticity and freshness which could alone benefit her; and opening the gate, she passed into the road. Thence she turned into a lane at a little distance; and along this well-shaded narrow avenue she rambled with the book in her hand, but with her thoughts fixed on subjects far different from its contents. Be it recollected that it is the month of September of which we are writing. The day had been sultry—it had left a portion of its heaviness in the evening atmosphere; and this was the reason why Christina had fancied that the air in the garden had been deficient in elasticity.

She was proceeding along the lane, when all of a sudden she heard footsteps behind her, preceded by a sound as if of some one bursting through the hedge; and on looking back our heroine found herself confronted by a figure that filled her with a sudden terror. The aspect of the individual was alone sufficient to strike her with this dismay: but it was all the greater when the conviction rushed in unto her mind that she beheld before her the ruffian of the previous night's adventure. The Lascar's dress was just the same as it struck Christina to be when the fellow, having opened the door of the carriage, snatched the purse from her brother's hand,—the same too as he subsequently described it to her. We need hardly add that the wretch was the Burker: but it may be proper to observe that he now at once recognised Christina—for he had seen her walking in the Queen's garden at the time he was on the watch to consummate his murderous purpose.

For a few moments Christina's tongue was paralysed with dismay; and she could not give vent to the scream which rose up in her throat. The Burker, who carried a bludgeon in his hand, burst out into a coarse chuckling laugh—and said, "You're an uncommon pretty gal; and it would be a sin to frighten you. Come, young Miss—just hand us over your purse, as well as that there gold watch and chain—and there's nuffin more to be said."

Christina swept her eyes up and down the lane: but no one was to be seen except the ruffian who stood before her; and the nearest houses were too far off to be reached by a scream if she sent one pealing forth from her lips. She was frightened—she was dismayed: the Burker grew impatient—and in a still more savage tone than that in which he had before spoken, he exclaimed, "Out with the purse! off with the chain!—or by jingo I'll help myself!"

The imprecation was however more terrible than the comparatively moderate one which we have inserted in its place; and Christina was sinking with terror, when it struck her that she heard the sounds of a horse's hoofs at a distance. Inspired by the hope of aid, she darted away from the spot, but the ruffian was immediately at her heels—and in a few moments he violently seized her by her dress. Her screams rang forth as she struggled desperately with the miscreant; and all of a sudden a horseman appeared round the corner of a diverging lane. The Burker's ear had not caught the same sounds which had heralded this approach of succour to that of Christina; and he was suddenly stricken with alarm on beholding this unexpected appearance. For he in a moment recognised the horseman — although the latter recognised not him in that Lascar garb which he wore.

Up to the spot the horseman rode: he sprang from his steed; and the Burker, who had let go his hold upon Christina, aimed a tremendous blow with his club at the young maiden's champion. The latter dexterously avoided it—and sprang forward to grapple with the ruffian,—when the last-mentioned individual thought it better not to hazard a conflict; and rushing through the hedge, as he had done on the preceding night, he disappeared from the view of Christina and her deliverer.

The young maiden was sinking with terror; for at one moment she had fancied that murder's work would be done, and that nothing could save her champion from the fury of the blow dealt against him. Her deliverer now turned towards her; and with the most gentlemanly courtesy he spoke a few reassuring words. Then he hastened to pick up her straw hat which had come off, as well as her book and her parasol which she had dropped in her fright. The horse meanwhile had remained upon the spot, although its rider had let the bridle go; and the animal was now feeding on the grass by the side of the lane.

Christina expressed her gratitude in suitable terms; and feeling full of confusion on account of the dishevelled state of her hair and the disordered condition of her toilet, the blood came back to those cheeks which an instant before were pale with terror. Her deliverer was struck by her extraordinary beauty, though there was nothing disrespectful in his gaze: on the contrary his entire manner and conduct were marked by the kindest and most polished courtesy. He was a young man—a little past four-and-twenty years of age—exceedingly handsome—and evidently belonging to the best sphere of society. He now turned aside under pretence of looking after his horse, but in reality to give Christina an opportunity of arranging her hair and restoring her toilet. This the young maiden hastily did; and when her deliverer again turned towards her, it was still with blushes but with more self-possession than at first, that she renewed the expression of her thanks for the service he had rendered her.

"Do not think the less of my courage," said the gentleman, smiling,—"or rather perhaps I ought to entreat that you will not tax me with cowardice in not pursuing the ruffian: but it was entirely through the fear that you were overcome by your alarm and might need prompt assistance."

"It would be impossible, sir," replied Christina, "to harbour a thought so ungenerous, so unfounded, and so insulting towards one who has served me so signally."

The young gentleman bowed in acknowledgment of this assurance; and then said, "I presume that you reside in this neighbourhood?"

"At a distance of about a mile," answered Christina.

"You will permit me to escort you as far as your dwelling?" said her new acquaintance: "for it is quite possible that villanous Lascar may be loitering about in the neighbourhood."

Christina gladly and thankfully accepted the proffered courtesy: her deliverer threw the bridle over his arm and walked by the horse's side, so that he might keep better companionship with Christina.

"You are deceived, sir," she said, "as to that man, although it is very natural you should be guided by appearances. He is not a Lascar—but some English robber in disguise."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the stranger with astonishment.

"Yes, it is as I tell you," rejoined Christina. "He robbed my brother last night as we were returning from a party: there was a conflict—a struggle—but, to be brief, the man escaped."

Christina's companion surveyed the young lady with the utmost interest while she spoke; and yet he had sufficient command over his feeling of admiration to prevent it from bordering upon rudeness. He thought he had never seen any one so exquisitely beautiful as she by whose side he was now walking. Her countenance, her figure, her looks, her manners—the silvery tones of her voice—all formed a combination of charms and attractions that ravished his heart. He longed to know more of her, and to improve his acquaintance with one who thus in a few minutes had made so deep an impression upon him. But all the while Christina herself was perfectly unaware that her blended beauty and modesty had inspired her companion with so much interest on her behalf.

He now inquired the exact particulars of what had occurred between herself and the robber. The details were not long: but as Christina gave them, her deliverer drank in the sounds of her voice as if they were those of a delicious music. When she had done speaking, he proceeded to give her to understand that he was an officer in the army—that he was on leave of absence from his regiment—and that he was temporarily staying with some friends at Kensington. He congratulated himself on the fortunate occurrence of having taken an evening ride in that particular direction; and he concluded by intimating that his name was Captain Stanley.

Immediately struck with this name, Christina glanced rapidly towards her companion—and said, "Might I ask whether your father is Sir William Stanley who resides near Liverpool?"

"The same!" cried the Captain, both overjoyed and astonished at this species of recognition on the part of the beautiful young lady whose acquaintance he was so anxious to cultivate. "But how is it possible——"

"I have heard Mr. Redcliffe speak of you," replied Christina, thus anticipating the question.

"Mr. Redcliffe!—that kind generous man!" exclaimed Captain Stanley: "as brave too as he is kind—for he saved my father's life amidst the jungles of India!"

"Mr. Redcliffe is a kind friend of mine," rejoined Christina: "my brother lives with him altogether. I myself am residing with an Eastern lady of rank and wealth; and our habitation is yonder villa."

"Rejoiced as I at first was," said Captain Stanley, "in having been enabled by circumstances to render assistance to a young lady, even while believing her a total stranger,—infinitely more delighted am I now on finding that we are not altogether unknown to each other. I only arrived in town yesterday; and it was my intention to call on Mr. Redcliffe to-morrow. Perhaps—perhaps," added the Captain hesitatingly, "I may venture likewise to call at your residence, to assure myself that you will in the meantime have perfectly recovered from the alarm produced by this incident."

All the rules of politeness as well as the additional ones of gratitude prevented Christina from giving a negative response to this request; and with artless candour she said, "If you do me the honour of calling, Captain Stanley, the Lady Indora with whom I live will personally express her thanks for the service you have rendered one for whom she cherishes a sisterly affection."

This portion of the dialogue took place in the road from which the lane diverged; and the gate of the villa was now in sight. Scarcely had the young maiden given the answer just placed upon record, when a gentleman on horseback was seen rapidly approaching; and Christina at once recognised Lord Octavian Meredith. She instantaneously became aware of the necessity of maintaining all her fortitude, her firmness, and her feminine dignity: for the conviction smote her that he was there, in that neighbourhood, to seek an interview with herself—perhaps a parting one—before he fulfilled his promise by going abroad to rejoin Zoe. Captain Stanley did not notice that anything peculiar had at the moment transpired to startle his fair companion: for she was indeed startled for a single instant on recognising Lord Octavian. As for his lordship himself, he suddenly drew in his bridle and brought his steed to a halt at a distance of about twenty yards from Christina and Captain Stanley: then, the next moment, he abruptly wheeled round his horse and galloped away.

"That gentleman appears to have taken the wrong road," observed the Captain, utterly unsuspicious of how well Christina was acquainted with him; "and he has only this instant perceived his mistake."

"Perhaps so," said the young maiden, scarcely knowing what she did say: for all her self-possession abandoned her as a sudden thought flashed in unto her brain.

Was it possible that Meredith could have fancied she was walking with a rival?—that it was a suitor for her hand whom he beheld in her company, and who with the familiarity of intimacy had dismounted from his horse in order that he might the more conveniently and agreeably enjoy the pleasures of discourse? Innocent and artless though Christina were, yet no young lady of her age could be so utterly inexperienced in the ways of the world as not at once to perceive how naturally and even reasonably a suspicion of that sort might strike the mind of Lord Octavian Meredith.

The gate of the villa was now reached; and Captain Stanley said, with a polite bow, "I will do myself the pleasure of calling to-morrow. But you have not honoured me by saying for whom I am to inquire?"

"This is the Lady Indora's villa," answered Christina; "and I am Miss Ashton."

"Good evening, Miss Ashton," rejoined Captain Stanley; and springing upon his horse, he rode away from the spot.

Christina's feelings had been suddenly and powerfully wrung by the incident in respect to Lord Octavian Meredith. She had no unmaidenly desire for the young nobleman to be convinced that she loved him: but on the other hand she was averse to the idea that he should suppose she had been favouring the suit of another. For she saw at once that supposing it to be really the case that she had thus favoured another suit, and if it were indeed a reality that her heart or her hand was engaged elsewhere,—she ought at once to have mentioned the circumstance on the preceding evening at Tudor House as the best means of silencing the allusions to his own love which were made by Lord Octavian. She perceived that *he*, putting his own construction on the fact of her being with a handsome young gentleman, as Captain Stanley was, would naturally conclude that she had acted coquettishly, capriciously, and even immodestly in not having told him on the previous night that her heart was engaged to another. The idea of all this was most repugnant to the pure notions and delicate feelings of our amiable heroine.

On passing into the grounds attached to the villa, Christina felt so annoyed and distressed that she could not immediately enter the house. If she did, she would be courting questions on the part of the Queen—questions which might turn upon a topic that she did not like to approach. Therefore, to compose her thoughts and collect her self-possession, Christina rambled through the garden. It is but the strictest justice to our heroine to declare most positively and unreservedly that she had not the slightest anticipation of what was to follow: or else not for worlds would she have placed herself in a position to encounter it. Twice had she slowly made a tour of the garden—for the third time was she taking the round, with the intention of entering the villa when this last stroll was completed. She reached that extremity which joined the field—the point that was remotest from the house, and was most enveloped in the shade of the umbrageous trees—the spot, in a word, where Sagoonah's interviews had been wont to take place with Madame Angelique—Christina had reached that spot, we say, when there was a sudden rustling amongst the evergreens, and Lord Octavian Meredith stood before her.

All in a moment our heroine's fullest self-possession came to her aid: all her dignity was summoned up; and what she had last been thinking of in connexion with the previous incident, was absorbed in that of wounded pride, bordering on resentment, that the young nobleman should thus seek her after his solemn promise at Tudor Lodge. He himself was ashy pale, but labouring under a deep concentrated inward excitement: his white lips were compressed—his arms were folded across his breast—he stood confronting her with the air of one who sought an explanation, was determined to have it, and fancied that he had a perfect right to demand it.

"We meet, Christina," he said, "for the last time:"—and his voice sounded unnatural in its lowness and hollowness.

"Our meeting of last night, my lord," responded Christina firmly, "should have no sequence. Remember your pledge—and you have broken it!"

"Listen to me—listen to me but for an instant!" he said, with such concentrated vehemence that he seemed as if scarcely able to restrain the outbreak of feelings tremendously agitated. "Circumstances would not permit me to depart until to-morrow; and I could not resist the temptation of riding round into this neighbourhood—for accident made me aware of the place of your abode, which I never knew till this morning. I met Sir Frederick Latham, and he spoke of you. That was how I learnt your place of residence. I did not mean to seek an interview with you—I respected my pledge—I intended to observe it——God knows," he added bitterly "it is more than ever my intention to keep it *now*, after what I have seen!"

"What you have seen, my lord?" exclaimed Christina, indignantly: and then, the next moment, she was half suffocated by the feelings which surged up into her throat: but she held back the words to which they would have prompted her to give utterance, for she was suddenly smitten with the conviction that it would be more dangerous and unmaidenly to vindicate herself by explanations than to allow Lord Octavian to remain under the impression which he had received from his own construction of the recent incident on the road.

"I tell you, Christina," he exclaimed, vehemently, "that I did not mean to seek an interview with you! I considered our parting of last night to be final——and heaven knows the pang it cost me to breathe that word *farewell!* But I could not resist the temptation of riding round here to catch a glimpse of your home—of the place where you dwell. Oh, if I had foreseen——But it is better thus! it is better thus!" he passionately ejaculated: and yet he made a movement as if to stamp his foot with maddened rage.

"Yes, it is better thus, my lord," said Christina, who in endeavouring to entrench herself with a becoming feminine dignity, in reality became surrounded with a reserve that was not merely cold, but even had the air of haughty defiance.

At least so Meredith thought; and the idea was natural in his own morbid state of feeling. He therefore said with a tone and look of bitterest reproach, "You feel that you have dealt ungenerously with me—heartlessly—coquettishly; and you take refuge within the circle of your own haughty pride. You may tell me that I have no claim upon you—and you are right; for I am another's! You may tell me likewise that you are the mistress of your own actions, and that you owe no account of them to me: and again you will be right! But, Oh! Christina, had you for an instant been candid with me—had you suffered me to know when last we met——I do not mean last night—but the other day when I rescued you from the persons who were carrying you off——had you told me *then* that your heart was engaged to another——because it must have been so even *then*—for this attachment of your's cannot be merely of to-day——Oh! Christina, you would have awakened me from a dream—you would have aroused me to my senses! But no, no—you did it not! I told you that I loved you—you knew it—I even went so far as to declare that all my hopes of happiness were concentrated in the idea —the *one* idea that you might yet become my own adored and cherished wife; and you did not tell me that you loved another! It is true that you answered me with what methought was a becoming maiden dignity—and I loved you all the more tenderly for it. But still there was something in your manner, Christina, which at that time bade me hope——"

"No, my lord—no!" vehemently interrupted the young maiden, who had hitherto listened with the reader may conceive how much distress and anguish of mind to that long and passionately delivered speech, which was full of accusations that her sense of maidenly propriety would not permit her to explain away.

"Oh, but it was so, Christina!" exclaimed Meredith, terribly excited. "But if not *then*, what of last night? Think you that when the first word of allusion to this maddening, despairing love of mine had fallen from my lips,—think you, I ask, whether my speech would not have been checked if you, with that candour which I fancied you to possess, had at once told me that you loved another? Oh! Christina, it was not well of you. My God! how much have I suffered on your account!—and to be rewarded thus! If you loved me not, it was your duty to proclaim that fact. To keep it back, was to bid me hope! It was worse, —it was playing the part of a coquette!—it was heartless—it was wrong!"

Overwhelmed with these reproaches — half-believing them to be just so long as Meredith remained under his present impressions in respect to the circumstances of her being seen with Captain Stanley—half-resentful, on the other hand, at the bitter accusations thus hurled against her—yearning to explain everything, yet daring not to pronounce the words "I do not love another," for fear they should be taken as the avowal of "I love you,"—distressed and bewildered—wanting to say something, yet knowing not what to say—anxious to fly from the spot, yet transfixed there by the power of her feelings,—Christina leant against a tree for support; and the tears flowed thick and fast from her eyes.

"Oh! now you weep," exclaimed Meredith. "Weep on, false-hearted girl! An hour ago every tear you are at present shedding would have fallen like a drop of molten lead upon my heart, and I should have gone mad with grief! But now it does me good to see you weep, and to know that I have wrung those tears from your eyes! Ah, I envy not the man who will conduct *you* to the altar, deceiver that you are! Until within the hour that is passing, I would have staked my soul on your candour—your truthfulness! My God, how I should have been deceived! It would have been selling this soul of mine to Satan—and *you*, perfidious girl, the cause! Ah, though I am married—and it was as a married man that I dared love you, Christina—you know not the heart with which you have trifled, and which you have broken! Yet I will not curse you——No! ten thousand times no! I bless you, Christina!—and may God grant you with another all that happiness which, if circumstances permitted, it would have been my pride and joy to ensure you!"

The young nobleman made a hasty movement as if to turn abruptly away. Christina, on her part, made a movement as if about to speak: but she could not give utterance to a word. *His* excitement was moderating into a profound mournfulness: *her* distress and anguish of mind were rising into a terrible excitement.

"Yet one word more!" he said, for an instant arresting his own steps; "and I have done! Forgive me that I blamed you—pardon me that I reproached you! I have been too vehement—too impetuous! I was wrong, Christina, — I was wrong! But my feelings hurried me away. Once more—and for the last time, do I pray heaven to award you its blessing! Yes—may you be happy and blest!"

With these words Lord Octavian disappeared from Christina's presence. She started forward: his name was at the very tip of her tongue: she was about to call him back: but with such an effort of fortitude as only the purest-minded and most virtuous being could have commanded under such circumstances, she restrained herself—the name was not spoken—and he reappeared *not* in her presence.

"Yes—it is better as it is," thought Christina to herself. "Let him fancy that I love another! —it will all the more easily wean him from that infatuation which has well nigh produced such fatal effects upon the amiable Zoe!"

And now, in a frame of mind that was fraught with a marvellous calmness—with all the pious resignation of a self-sacrificing, self-martyrising spirit—Christina Ashton re-entered the villa.

Lord Octavian Meredith hastened homeward, riding as if he were a madman mounted upon a mad steed. On gaining the more frequented parts of the town, he dashed amidst the vehicles with a recklessness which made every one who beheld him think that he was intoxicated with wine. Nevertheless, he reached his home in safety. Springing from his horse, he tossed the bridle to the domestic, who was half astonished and half frightened at his master's appearance: but Meredith saw not the effect which his strangely wild excitement produced. He rushed into the house: he summoned his valet, and gave immediate orders for his clothes to be packed up and for the carriage to be got in readiness, as he intended to start by the night-train for Dover. The valet was as astonished as the other domestic had been; and yet he knew his master too well to suppose for an instant that he had been drinking. He therefore thought that some sudden calamity, or else some serious indiscretion, must have driven Lord Octavian Meredith to the resolve of this precipitate departure. In order to lead Octavian, if possible, into conversation, the valet inquired, with every appearance of completest deference, whether his lordship did not intend to see Mr. Armitage before he took his departure?

"No—it is not necessary!" replied Meredith petulantly. "I will leave a note, to be sent to him to-morrow. Hasten you to get everything in readiness: prepare your own things likewise, for you will accompany me."

Having thus spoken, Octavian hastened to the

drawing-room, where he sat down and penned a few lines to Mr. Armytage. He simply said that being alarmed on account of Zoe's health, and considering that he was not doing his duty in allowing her thus to remain separated from him, he was about to rejoin her with the least possible delay. He then thought of writing a few last words to Christina: but he could pen nothing that satisfied him. Sheet after sheet did he tear up: and when the valet entered to announce that everything was ready for immediate departure, Lord Octavian was still commencing a new epistle, and still too without any satisfaction to himself. This last sheet of paper he therefore tore into fragments, like the former ones; and speeding down the stairs, he sprang into the carriage.

Now he gave full vent to the excitement which was torturing him:—he covered his face with his hands—he burst into an agony of weeping: he sobbed like a woman or a child.

"O Christina, Christina!" he murmured, in a broken voice: "to think that you could have loved another!"

The unhappy young nobleman proceeded to Dover: on the following day he passed over to Boulogne; and thence he journeyed with all possible despatch, to rejoin that wife whom he was now seeking in the frenzy of desperation rather than under the influence of a pure unalloyed sense of duty.

CHAPTER CXXV.

THE DESK.

It was the second morning after the brilliant entertainment at Tudor House—breakfast was over—Anastatia had retired to her boudoir for a while—

and the great merchant had sought his study to look over his letters, it not being his purpose to visit the City on this particular day. Not another syllable had been spoken by Sir Frederick Latham relative to that incident of the ball-night which had led him to entrust the key of the safe to his wife; and she on her own side had felt no inclination to revive the topic. The merchant fancied that Anastatia had been extravagant in some respect, and had therefore contracted a debt which she chose not to mention to him: he congratulated himself on the policy he had pursued: instead of chiding and reproaching, he had acted with magnanimity; and he naturally concluded that the effect of such conduct would be more salutary and would be all the better appreciated, than if he had displayed anger and irritation. On the other hand Anastatia—though having been scandalously plundered by Madame Angelique, and therefore really innocent of any extravagance involving her in debt—was fully conscious that she laboured under a suspicion of an opposite character; and she was compelled to bear the imputation of extravagance because she dared not enter upon explanations which would reveal the whole truth. She was not happy in her mind: she deeply felt the generosity of Sir Frederick's conduct; and more than once since the occurrence of the incident had she said within herself, "Oh, that I could tell him everything!"

Sir Frederick, as we have said, had retired to his own private room; and there for a while did he busy himself with the letters that had reached him that morning. Some he answered: on the backs of others he made memoranda for reference to the account-books at the office in the City; and others he placed aside that they might be submitted to his partners when in consultation with them. Presently the door opened, and a footman entered to state that the architect who had built Tudor House, requested an interview with Sir Frederick.

The merchant desired that the architect should be admitted; and in a few minutes this individual was conducted into the study. Presenting a paper to Sir Frederick, he intimated that he had called to receive the balance of his account.

"Which might have been settled long ago, Mr. Styles," said the merchant, drawing himself up with a certain cold business-like pomposity, "if you had chosen to send it in."

"I am perfectly aware of that, Sir Frederick," responded the architect: "but I did not want the money—I knew it was safe—and moreover I really had not time to go into the different details."

The merchant opened the document which had been presented to him; and spreading it on his desk, he proceeded to examine the items of the account. Taking down a file, he referred to former accounts: then he consulted the cash-book, which he took from a drawer; and having thus satisfied himself that all the items were correct, he proceeded to verify the addition of the pounds, shilling, and pence columns. All this he did in a precise and methodical manner, with coolness and deliberation, and yet with a certain perceptible business-pride, so to speak, which in itself was as much as to say, "Look how carefully I conduct all my business—and profit by the example!"

Having added up the columns, Sir Frederick slowly bent his cold eyes upon the architect—and said gravely, if not sternly, "Mr. Styles, might I ask whether you have frequently the misfortune of making mistakes in adding up your accounts?"

"Errors will occur, Sir Frederick," was the answer: "but I flatter myself that I make them as seldom as most people."

"Errors never occur in my office, sir!" observed the merchant, drawing himself up. "A clerk of mine who should have the misfortune to make such an addition as this, would never have the chance of making another within the walls of my establishment. Look, Mr. Styles! You have set down a total of eleven hundred and thirteen pounds, eleven shillings, and eleven pence-halfpenny; whereas I make it eleven hundred and thirteen pounds twelve shillings, and three pence halfpenny."

The architect felt infinitely relieved when he found that the discrepancy was of so trifling a character: and as his time was precious, he wished to settle the business at once. But Sir Frederick appeared to take a sort of cold-blooded inward delight in delaying him as a punishment for having made a mistake in his account to the extent of a few pence. He therefore sententiously expatiated on the necessity of being accurate in even the minutest matters: and then he slowly and deliberately cast up the columns, with the architect looking over his shoulder.

"And now, Mr. Styles," he said, "if you will receipt this account, it shall be paid."

Rising from his chair, the great merchant advanced towards the safe, which he opened; and he took forth the cash-box. Meanwhile the architect had receipted the account; and Sir Frederick looked at the mode in which the receipt was written, to assure himself that it was consistent with the proper formality. He then opened the cash-box; he looked in one compartment, where the notes ought to be—it was empty! Sir Frederick was astounded: but not for an instant did he suffer his features to betray the feeling which had thus seized upon him. He opened the other compartment, where the gold ought to be: not a single coin was there! Still Sir Frederick was outwardly as calm, as unruffled, and as imperturbable as ever: and he coldly said, as he closed the cash-box, "After all, I had better give you a cheque for the amount."

"Just as you please, Sir Frederick," replied the Architect, making way for the merchant to sit down at his desk again.

Sir Frederick wrote out the cheque: Mr. Styles received it—bowed—and took his departure. When he was gone, Sir Frederick again rose from his seat, and looked into the safe—but beheld none of the notes nor golden coins there. He consigned the cash-box back to its place—looked up the safe—and put the key in his pocket.

"There must have been upwards of two thousand two hundred pounds in that cash-box the night before last," he said to himself; "and Anastasia took it all!"

The merchant naturally concluded that his wife had been dreadfully extravagant in various ways; but he was bewildered as to what particular debt could have amounted to so large a sum. He knew that Anastatia did not gamble at the card-table, for the best of all possible reasons that she never played cards at all. It could not have been to assist her brother that she had been so suddenly pressed for money: because if so, the intervention of the man Shadbolt would have been unnecessary. That it was *one* debt, and not several, which she had paid the night before last, was to be argued from the fact of only one creditor, or one creditor's representative, having called to assert a pecuniary claim. Who, then, could be this *one* creditor to whom she had contracted so immense a liability? —for as a matter of course Sir Frederick felt convinced that Anastatia, and Anastatia only, had emptied the cash-box of its contents.

For a moment the merchant thought of proceeding straight to his wife to question her on the subject: but this idea he the next instant banished from his mind. He had told her to say nothing more on the subject—he himself had avoided it: he felt that there would be something mean, little, and paltry in re-opening that topic, inasmuch as the very prefatory words which in such a case he would have to utter must be to the effect that she had taken a much larger sum than he had anticipated or intended. Nevertheless, Sir Frederick was resolved to institute some investigation. His mind was troubled: suspicions, vague and indefinite, were rising up in his brain. He remembered his wife's confusion when a week back he had sought her in the drawing-room immediately after her first interview with Shadbolt: he naturally considered that there was something strange in the manner in which this same Shadbolt had come to persecute her on the night that she was receiving company —strange also that she should have been so much troubled when his visit was announced—and that with a sort of terror she should have granted him an interview instead of with becoming dignity bidding him call on a future day and a more suitable occasion. And now, too, Sir Frederick bethought himself of the way in which Anastatia had swept her letters and papers into her desk on that afternoon when he (Sir Frederick) had sought her in the drawing-room, as already alluded to. All these reflections troubled the great City merchant; and in spite of himself he felt those suspicions which were agitating his mind, gathering strength and power, although of so vague and indefinite a character.

From what the reader has seen of the merchant's disposition, he may have comprehended that beneath a certain exterior show of cold pride and subdued ostentation, there was no small amount of real meanness and pettiness. These little feelings were now rising uppermost; and under their influence Sir Frederick found himself leaving the study and making his way up to that apartment where Anastatia's writing-desk usually stood upon a small table in a recess. On entering this apartment, Sir Frederick looked at the writing-desk with an expression of countenance as if he were saying to himself, "That desk doubtless contains the means of elucidating this mystery!"

As he immediately afterwards slowly glanced around, he beheld a small bunch of keys lying upon another table. The temptation was irresistible: indeed the presence of those keys was precisely what the merchant was desiring at the instant. He took them up: the very first which he applied to the writing-desk was the one that fitted; and now that merchant who was usually all business-like deliberation in his proceedings, was hasty, quick, and even nervous in what he was doing. He was afraid that his wife or a servant might enter and surprise him in the midst of an action which he felt to be mean and pitiful, although perhaps not altogether without justification under the circumstances. He turned over the papers; he took up a pink-tinted billet; and on reading the name of Madame Angelique, a dark expression came over his countenance. He perused its contents. It demanded five hundred and sixty-three pounds, "as per bill delivered;" and it intimated that Mr. Isaac Shadbolt was empowered to receive the amount. This individual's two visits to Tudor House were therefore no longer a mystery: but there were other circumstances which were very far from being satisfactory to Sir Frederick Latham.

"A year has elapsed," he muttered to himself, "since I expressly desired Anastatia to leave off dealing with that woman whose infamous character I accidentally discovered, and which I mentioned to my wife as my reason for the request that I made at the time. She must have disobeyed me —she must have since been secretly dealing there!"

Graver and darker, as well as more definite became the merchant's suspicions; and he hastened to look over the rest of the papers which he found in the desk. These were all Madame Angelique's bills, duly receipted at dates shortly after they were sent in; and there was no bill of a date later than the period when, a year back, Sir Frederick had so expressly desired his wife to discontinue her patronage of Madame Angelique's millinery establishment. But amongst those papers was the receipt given by Mr. Shadbolt for the sum specified in the pink-tinted billet. Sir Frederick's suspicion flowed into the correct channel: he regarded that billet as the vehicle of an extortion. Indeed his wife's conduct itself naturally appeared to be replete with causes for misgiving and distrust.

"Wherefore," asked Sir Frederick of himself, "should she have taken upwards of two thousand pounds to pay a bill of between five and six hundred?"

There were no other documents in the desk which at all interested the merchant: he arranged the papers in the order in which he had found them—he closed the desk—he deposited the keys on the other table—and he issued from the apartment. His mind was already made up how to act: he ordered his horse—and dispensing with the attendance of a groom, rode forth alone. Brixton Hill was soon reached; and giving his horse to a loitering boy to hold, Sir Frederick Latham knocked at the door of Madame Angelique's villa. The retired milliner was at home; and the merchant was conducted into her presence. Personally he was a stranger to her; and as he gave no name to the pretty servant-girl who answered the door, Madame Angelique was unaware who the visitor was, as well as what his business might be. She saw that he was cold and reserved in his manner: but she, on the other hand, was all affability and courtesy as she desired him to be seated.

"Perhaps you will know my name, Madame Angelique," began the merchant, "when I announce it as Sir Frederick Latham."

The ex-milliner was startled; and her guilty conscience instantaneously smote her with the idea that her recent successful extortion, the proceeds of which she had duly shared with Mr. Shadbolt, was known to the victim's husband.

"Whether you have anything to fear as the result of my visit," continued Sir Frederick, "depends entirely on yourself. If you answer all my questions in a manner proving that you are responding faithfully and truthfully, you have nothing to apprehend: but, if on the other hand, you prevaricate or attempt to deceive me, I shall at once take measures which you will repent."

"Good heavens, sir, what do you mean?" faltered the terrified Frenchwoman, now bitterly repenting her folly in having jeopardised herself anew after having so well escaped from former perils.

"Lady Anastatia Latham," continued the merchant, fixing his cold eyes upon the ex-milliner, "very recently paid some five or six hundred pounds to an agent of your's by the name of Shadbolt. You see that I know everything; and it is therefore hardly necessary that I should allude to your billet in which you made that demand."

"Oh! I will give back the money at once, Sir Frederick!" exclaimed the terrified Frenchwoman, quailing beneath the merchant's cold searching gaze.

"No—that is not the object of my visit," he responded. "I care nothing for the money. All the world knows that to Sir Frederick Latham such a sum is as a drop of water to the ocean. You confess that you had no real claim to that money?"

"It is but too clear, Sir Frederick," replied Madame Angelique, "that you know this much already. But what do you want of me?"—and she quivered from head to foot.

"I want you to tell me," rejoined the merchant, with a coldly resolute air, "by what means you gained such power—such ascendancy over my wife—the means by which you were enabled to exercise this terrorism—this coercion? Speak candidly, Madame Angelique; and I will not merely forgive you for the extortion—an extortion which would transport you—but I will go so far as to declare that no evil nor inconvenience shall result to yourself from whatsoever information you may give me. Come, shall I assist you? Well, then, let me at once proclaim my knowledge that your late establishment was not altogether for millinery purposes."

"Oh! but, Sir Frederick," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "what—what will become of poor Lady Anastatia?"

"You have almost said sufficient in those few words," answered the merchant, quivering inwardly, though outwardly he still betrayed no emotion, "to prevent me from wishing to continue this discourse. Nevertheless you must speak out: if you have any regard for yourself, you will have none for Lady Anastatia. Come, be quick!—explain whatsoever you may have to tell me without more useless parlance."

"I will, Sir Frederick—I will," replied Madame Angelique. "Lady Anastatia—Ah! it is shocking that you should drive me to this confession!—certainly did make use of my establishment in a particular way——"

"She received a paramour there?" said the merchant, still speaking in a voice which trembled not.

"Well, yes, Sir Frederick. Women will be women——"

"Proceed, madam," he said sternly. "My wife met a paramour at your house? How long was this ago?"

"Well, Sir Frederick, the first time it might have been between two and three years—perhaps quite three years—as far as I can recollect——"

"Profligate even before marriage!" muttered the merchant to himself. "Go on, Madame Angelique," he added audibly. "How often do you suppose——"

"Oh, not very often, sir!—a very few times!" exclaimed Madame Angelique.

"And has this ever taken place within the last two years?" inquired the merchant, thus including the period which had elapsed since his marriage with Lady Anastatia.

"Well, Sir Frederick," rejoined the Frenchwoman, "to tell the truth, there may have been some three or four interviews within the term you name—but that was more than a year ago—indeed for the last twelvemonth I have seen nothing of Lady Anastatia—and she suddenly ceased to deal with me."

"Now tell me, Madame Angelique," continued the merchant, "who was the paramour that my guilty wife thus met? Or perhaps there was more than one?" he added, with a slight perceptible bitterness of tone.

"No—only one: of *that* I am certain," answered the Frenchwoman. "But I really do not know his name——indeed I don't think I ever saw him——"

"No? I presume because he was admitted into your house from that of your accommodating neighbour, M. Bertin, next door?"—and there was now a more perceptible tincture of bitterness in Sir Frederick Latham's accents.

"Is it possible that you were ever in my house?" asked Madame Angelique.

"I? Never, madam!" and the merchant drew himself up with a cold disdainful hauteur.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Frederick," said Madame Angelique: "but as you seem to know everything, I thought perhaps—pray excuse me ——I intended no offence——some of the first people have been in my late establishment——"

"So it appears," said the merchant, half drily, half bitterly; "female as well as male. But can you not afford me any clue to the discovery of this paramour of my wife's? Do you not know, madam, that it is now a husband who is seeking to learn the author of his dishonour—the name of the villain who has wrecked his happiness——No, not wrecked his happiness! I will not admit that the profligacies of a vile woman and of some unprincipled libertine can wield so tremendous an influence over Sir Frederick Latham."

"Really I am unable to give you any information on that head——I would if it were in my power——I have no reason," continued Madame Angelique, "to conceal anything from you. I very seldom saw the gentlemen who came to my establishment: it was sufficient for me that any lady might say she had made an appointment there—and all was managed secretly through the aid of trustworthy domestics——"

"Do you think it would be of any use," inquired Sir Frederick Latham, "if I were to go and question M. Bertin?"

"Not the slightest," responded Madame Angelique. "M. Bertin never knew with what particular lady any particular gentleman might have had an appointment. It was sufficient for the gentleman to afford M. Bertin some proof that he had no sinister nor hostile motive in seeking to pass through his house into mine——"

"I understand," interjected Sir Frederick. "There is consequently no means for me to discover the name of my guilty wife's paramour?"

"None that I can point out," replied Madame Angelique. "But pray let me beseech you, Sir Frederick Latham—do let me beg and entreat that you will deal mercifully with her ladyship! Ah! sir, consider——"

"Silence, madam!" interrupted the merchant sternly: "it is not for you to offer these intercessions—it is for me to act as I think fit. We made a bargain at the outset—and I will keep it. You have given me all the information in your power; and you shall not suffer therefrom. For the present I enjoin you to maintain the strictest secrecy as to everything that has now passed between us. It is possible that I may have to see you again——"

"At any hour, Sir Frederick," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "may you obtain access to me. And relative to that little sum——"

"Keep it—keep it," responded the merchant, disdainfully: and taking up his hat, he issued forth from the apartment.

No one, on perceiving Sir Frederick Latham issue forth from that villa—deliberately mount his horse—and as methodically take a shilling from his purse to give to the poor boy who had held the animal, would have conjectured how much his feelings had been inwardly agitated, or how tensely they were still wrung. He had affected in Madame Angelique's presence that the supposed guilt of his wife, and the presumed villany of some paramour, could not wield so great an influence over him as to wreck his happiness altogether; but he had not in that declaration expressed the truth. His was the sort of pride which was exactly the one to be most wounded by the exposure of his dishonour. He was too shrewd and coldly calculating not to be aware that if an explosion took place, all his friends and acquaintances would in their mingled scandal and wisdom observe "that it was just what he might have expected for marrying out of his own sphere." And then too, if he brought the affair before the tribunals and sued for a divorce, he would have to parade all Madame Angelique's evidence—he would have to show that Anastatia had been incontinent before her marriage—and those same scandalous wiseacre friends of his would, with knowing shakes of the head, whisper amongst themselves "that a daughter of the aristocracy would never have thrown herself away upon him unless she had very good reasons for so doing."

But how was Sir Frederick to act? To consign to oblivion everything he had heard, was impossible: to live with Anastatia as before, was not to be thought of: to abstain from making her acquainted with the fact that everything was discovered, was more than even the cold calculating worldly disposition of Sir Frederick Latham could bend itself to. For the first time in his life the great merchant found himself bewildered how to act; and, as he rode homeward a thousand painful thoughts conflicted in his brain.

On reaching Tudor House, he learnt that Anastatia had gone out in the carriage, and that her ladyship had left a message to the effect that she intended to proceed to town to call on her parents, the Earl and Countess of Fordwich. Sir Frederick was glad that his wife was thus temporarily absent; it afforded him an opportunity of deliberating a while on the course which he ought to pursue. But feeling as if the confined air of his study oppressed him, he walked forth into his grounds. While there, he beheld a carriage drive up to the gate; and as the equipage entered, he saw that it was Queen Indora's. The Queen herself was not however in it: the occupants were Mr. Redcliffe, Christian, and Christina. The twins had come to pay the usual visit of courtesy after having been invited to the entertainment at Tudor House: while Mr. Redcliffe also deemed it suitable to pay his respects in the same quarter, inasmuch as he himself had likewise been invited, though he declined the invitation; and moreover Sir Frederick was the British financial agent for that royal lady whom Mr. Redcliffe was engaged, when circumstances should permit, to conduct to the altar.

CHAPTER CXXVI.

THE BANK-NOTES.

The great City merchant was for almost the first time in his life in one of those moods which are utterly uncongenial for the reception of visitors: but the occupants of the carriage had already seen him in the grounds—and it was therefore impossible to deny himself. The carriage stopped—the twins and Mr. Redcliffe alighted—and Sir Frederick Latham advanced to welcome them.

The merchant maintained his wonted demeanour: no one could have suspected that anything unusual had occurred. After some little discourse he requested Christian and Christina to ramble about the grounds and gardens at their pleasure, while he remained conversing with Mr. Redcliffe. The twins were glad of this opportunity to leave the two gentlemen together: for they knew that Mr. Redcliffe purposed to make a particular communication to Sir Frederick Latham.

Accordingly, after a little more conversation on general topics, Mr. Redcliffe said, "Sir Frederick, I think it my duty to inform you of something which happened the night before last—and thereby to put you on your guard against a character who is evidently of a very desperate description, and who appears to be lurking about the least frequented suburbs of the metropolis."

"Do you mean a robber—a highwayman—a lurking thief?" asked the merchant.

"I do," responded Mr. Redcliffe. "The night before last, my young friends Mr. and Miss Ashton, when returning from your house in the carriage, were intercepted by a villain dressed as a Lascar, but who is beyond all doubt an English ruffian thus disguised. A struggle took place between him and Christian: Lord Rushbrook drove up at the time, and lent his aid: but the false Lascar managed to escape, and in a manner too which created much surprise in the mind of my young friend Ashton. It further appeared that on some previous night, this very same disguised Lascar stopped Lord Rushbrook, and either did actually rob him or attempted to rob him—but which it really was, I cannot say; for his lordship—perhaps from false pride—sought to hush up the matter. It is however Christian Ashton's opinion that the Viscount's groom could tell more of the particulars of that case. The Viscount begged Ashton not to mention at Tudor House a single syllable of any of these circumstances; and he advanced reasons which led Christian to promise compliance with this entreaty. But last evening Miss Ashton was herself waylaid by the same villain: fortunately however there was prompt succour at hand to rescue her; and the false Lascar escaped. It has now become so evident that the fellow is a most desperate and dangerous character, that I represented to Ashton this morning that it was a positive duty to disregard Lord Rushbrook's desire for secrecy and silence, and to put you upon your guard, inasmuch as twice in your nighbourhood have this robber's avocations been exercised. Whether you will mention all these things to Lady Anastatia, is a matter for your own consideration."

"To be sure," said Sir Frederick, whose heart sickened at the mere mention of Lady Anastatia's name. "I am exceedingly obliged to you, Mr. Redcliffe, for all this information. Rushbrook has said not a word of either of those adventures, although I saw him yesterday——But how came it that he and Mr. Ashton should the night before last have suffered the villain to escape them?"

"I have already hinted," replied Mr. Redcliffe, "that the occurrence is somewhat a singular one. It appears that the false Lascar was completely in the power of Lord Rushbrook and our young friend Christian: they had hold upon his garments. All of a sudden the Lascar looked very hard at the Viscount, and said these words—'What about that safe and cash-box?'—whereupon the Viscount suddenly let go his hold upon the villain: he broke away from Christian, and thus escaped."

Sir Frederick Latham heard with a sudden astonishment the latter portion of this explanation: the words "safe" and "cash-box" all in an instant appeared by some incomprehensible means to connect what the merchant was now listening to, with all that for the last few hours had been so painfully uppermost in his mind.

"What were the words he made use of?" inquired Sir Frederick of Mr. Redcliffe.

"I recollect perfectly well," was the latter's response, "that Christian Ashton mentioned them to me as being precisely these—'What about that safe and cash-box?'—And then, it might have been imagination on Christian's part, but he assures me it struck him that Viscount Rushbrook seemed to stagger back a pace or two, while he certainly let go of the man's garments as if his hands had suddenly been smitten with paralysis. This description, moreover, seems to have been corroborated by what Rushbrook himself said immediately afterwards, and which was to the effect that he had been seized with a dizziness—a sudden sickness or something of the kind—and which he attributed to the viands he had eaten at supper having disagreed with him."

All this appeared more and more strange to Sir Frederick Latham: for with his knowledge of Rushbrook's character, he was naturally led to surmise that he had some very substantial reasons indeed for keeping silence, and enjoining it to be kept, in respect to the two perilous adventures with the Lascar. And moreover, Sir Frederick could not help thinking that what had been taken for a sudden paralysis of the hands, was in reality a terror inspired by the words thrown out from the lips of the false Lascar: while the plea of sickness from indigestion was merely an excuse to account for the same. But still the merchant was at a loss for any probable or feasible means of intelligibly connecting the adventure in respect to the Lascar with his own safe and cash-box whence all the money had disappeared.

"I can assure you, Sir Frederick," added Mr. Redcliffe, "our young friend Christian was very much annoyed that the false Lascar should have escaped him—and all the more so when he heard that by this escape the ruffian had remained at large to attempt an outrage against the youth's sister Christina."

"I will assuredly give orders to have my premises watched," observed Sir Frederick: "for so desperate a character as this false Lascar, may attempt murder before his exploits are cut short by the hand of justice."

The two gentlemen were now rejoined by Christian and Christina, who had been rambling through the grounds; and the party, taking their leave of Sir Frederick, drove away in the carriage.

Sir Frederick continued to walk in his grounds, pondering everything that had happened in the earlier part of the day, as well as everything that he had just heard. In reference to the safe and the cash-box he knew not what to think: the Lascar's allusion to those objects was so strange, it could not have been a mere coincidence. While he was thus in perplexity giving way to his reflections, Lord Rushbrook's phaeton came dashing up the avenue,—the Viscount driving, the groom seated by his side.

"There is something singular in these frequent visits of my brother-in-law," said the merchant to himself. "He was here yesterday—he is here again to-day. He cannot expect to get any more money out of me so soon; and I am sure that it is not through love of either his sister or myself that he favours us with such frequent visits."

And the merchant was right, though he suspected not how: for Rushbrook had indeed come to ascertain whether anything had been said in respect to the adventures with the Lascar. Sir Frederick went forward to receive his brother-in-law; and they entered the house together. After some little conversation, the merchant made a pretext for temporarily leaving the room; and he hastened in search of Rushbrook's groom. He had said nothing to the Viscount relative to all he had so recently heard: he wished in the first instance to learn whatsoever additional information the groom himself might be possibly able to afford. The man was found at the stables, looking at Sir

Frederick's horses; and the merchant beckoned him aside.

"What was that adventure with a disguised Lascar the other night?" asked Sir Frederick. "Come—I dare say your master did not wish to frighten us at Tudor House, and therefore he has told you to hold your tongue: but you need not hesitate to explain everything to me:"—and thus speaking, Sir Frederick placed a guinea in the groom's hand.

"Why, sir, the truth is," responded the domestic, "there were two adventures with that Lascar—one about a week back, and the other on the night of the party. To which do you allude, sir?"

"To both," was the response.

"On the first occasion, sir," resumed the domestic, "I think his lordship had taken a little too much of your wine, sir—saving your presence—and he upset the phaeton. I was stunned on the spot; and when I came to my senses again his lordship was crying out 'Stop thief!'—and then his lordship went on swearing terribly, making me believe that he had been robbed. There was something strange in his lordship's manner, sir—though he declared he had *not* been robbed——"

"And what about the adventure of the night before last?" inquired Sir Frederick.

"Why, sir, as we were driving home, we saw a fellow in white struggling with young Mr. Ashton; and then his lordship cried out that he was the very same Lascar who had robbed him the other night."

The groom proceeded to relate the incident of the Lascar's escape from Lord Rushbrook and Christian, just as Mr. Redcliffe had already detailed the circumstances to Sir Frederick: but the groom of his own accord added "that his lordship seemed struck quite aback when the ruffian spoke about the safe and cash-box."

"And you have not the slightest notion what the villain alluded to?" said the merchant inquiringly.

"Not the least, sir," replied the groom.

"Now tell me, my good fellow," continued Sir Frederick—and he put another guinea into the domestic's hand,—"has his lordship your master paid any considerable sum of money yesterday or to-day——I mean, is it within your knowledge that he has done so? Whatever information you give me, will do you no harm; and you can keep silent as to having been questioned in this way."

"I don't know, sir, whether his lordship has paid away any large sum of money," answered the groom: "but saving your presence, sir, and with no disrespect, I *do* know that there was an execution out against his lordship for twelve or thirteen hundred pounds—because he told me to take care that he was always denied if ever Buffer the Sheriff's officer should happen to call. Well, sir, yesterday his lordship drove to Mr. May's, the attorney's, in Gray's Inn Square; and when he came out of the office, he jumped into the phaeton, saying he didn't now care a curse for all the Buffers in existence."

"Breathe not a syllable to a soul that I have been questioning you," said Sir Frederick.

As he separated from the groom—who knew not what to think of the numerous queries that had been put to him—the merchant looked at his watch, and found that it was now three o'clock. He at once ordered his carriage to be got ready; and ascending to the drawing-room, he said to Rushbrook, "Your lordship must pardon me for leaving you so abruptly: but I have just received a letter which calls me into the City."

"Well, I shall be off likewise," said the Viscount. "Shall I give you a lift in my phaeton?"

"I thank you, my lord," responded the merchant: "but I set a value upon my neck, and your lordship's reckless driving by no means suits my ideas of safety."

During his ride into London, Sir Frederick Latham continued to reflect more and more on everything he had heard; and he wondered whether the inquiries he was about to institute would throw any light upon one portion of the topics which bewildered him. He was a man of remarkable sagacity in business-matters, and keenly prompt to seize upon any clue which by any possibility might seem to promise the unravelment of a mystery. He repaired straight to the office of Mr. May, the solicitor, in Gray's Inn Square: that gentleman was alone at the time in his private room; and he at once received Sir Frederick Latham. The lawyer and the merchant were personally unknown to each other: but the instant the great name of the latter was announced, the professional gentleman was on the alert to receive him with all possible courtesy and respect.

"Mr. May," said Sir Frederick, taking the seat which was proffered to him; "I am about to put three or four questions which may seem singular: but I beg you not to refuse to answer them on that account—nor to prejudge disparagingly the nobleman whose name I shall have to mention. I allude to my brother-in-law, the Viscount Rushbrook."

"Ah, indeed!" said Mr. May, with the air of one to whom that name was far from unfamiliar.

"You know the Viscount," continued Sir Frederick,—"I mean professionally——"

"I have not the honour of being his lordship's professional adviser," interjected Mr. May.

"No—but you have been very recently engaged against him," resumed the merchant; "and yesterday he called upon you——"

"True, Sir Frederick," responded the solicitor: "his lordship came to settle a little matter——but to be candid with you, Viscount Rushbrook paid me some thirteen hundred pounds to settle a liability on which I had been compelled to issue an execution against his person."

"Precisely so," said the merchant. "And now I am about to ask the question which may seem most singular. Did you happen to take the numbers of the notes in which Lord Rushbrook settled this liability?"

"Most assuredly," exclaimed Mr. May: "for I at once sent off the money to my banker's; and as a matter of precaution, I invariably keep the numbers of bank-notes thus confided to the care of a clerk."

"Would you favour me with a sight of those numbers?" asked Sir Frederick.

The lawyer, wondering at the request, at once produced the list,—which the merchant compared with a slip that he took from his own pocket-book. All the numbers on Mr. May's list corresponded with a quantity of those which were on the merchant's list: but Sir Frederick displayed not any particular feeling which could enable the lawyer to judge of the effect produced on him by the result ot the investigation.

"I return you my best thanks," said the merchant, rising from his seat; "and I beg that the subject of our interview may be kept altogether secret."

"I hope, Sir Frederick," said Mr. May, "that there is nothing unpleasant——"

"Not the least!" interrupted the merchant. It was as much for Lord Rushbrook's sake as my own, that it was desirable to ascertain the numbers of these notes which were paid into your hand."

Sir Frederick Latham then took his leave of the lawyer; and entering his carriage, he ordered the coachman to return to Balham Hill. The point was now ascertained: the greater portion of the contents of the cash-box had evidently found their way into the hands of Lord Rushbrook.

"And thus Anastatia," said the merchant to himself, "has robbed her husband for the sake of her brother! This is but too evident. But yet I am as far off as ever from comprehending what meant the allusion of that false Lascar to the safe and the cash-box. This is a strange mystery: But I must unravel it!"

During the remainder of the drive homeward, the merchant continued to reflect how he should act in respect to his wife—but without coming to any positive decision. On reaching Tudor Lodge, he found a note from Anastatia, to the effect that her mother, the Countess of Fordwich, had been taken very ill, and that she (Anastatia) therefore purposed to remain with her parent until the evening. Sir Frederick was not sorry: the delay would afford him additional leisure to settle his mind as to the plan to be pursued in respect to that wife whom he believed to have been so guilty. He dined by himself; and afterwards walked forth into his grounds—it being a beautiful moonlit evening in that autumn season of the year of which we are writing.

While thus rambling in the garden, Sir Frederick Latham revolved in his own mind every particular which he had received from the lips of Madame Angelique in the forenoon; and he thought to himself that he had not been precise enough in his questions for the purpose of ascertaining who was the paramour that had been spoken of. He fancied that there were other queries he might have put—minuter particulars which he might have gleaned; and he determined to visit Madame Angelique again forthwith. He was a cautious man, as the reader has seen: he wished to do nothing rashly: it was consistent with his character to obtain as many details as possible in respect to circumstances of such grave importance. He ordered his horse to be saddled; and this time he took a groom to attend upon him; for the road from Balham Hill to Brixton is in some parts lonely—and Sir Frederick had the Lascar prominent amongst other images in his mind

The evening, as we have said, was beautifully moonlit; and a distance of about three miles and a half was soon accomplished. The merchant did not however wish his domestic to perceive where he intended to call, for fear lest the villa should be known as the residence of a retired tradeswoman from the West End. Sir Frederick therefore bade his dependant await his return at a respectable inn at a little distance; and he proceeded on foot to Madame Angelique's abode. On reaching his destination, Sir Frederick beheld no lights in any of the front rooms; and he thought that probably Madame Angelique might be out: for as it was only half-past nine o'clock he could not suppose that she had thus early retired to rest. He knocked at the front door; and at that instant violent screams pealing through the house, reached the ear of Sir Frederick Latham.

We must here interrupt the thread of our narrative for a brief space, in order to explain the reason of these cries. There was a fair being held at a little distance, in the neighbourhood; and Madame Angelique had given permission to her two men-servants (the coachman and footman) as well as to her cook to visit the scene. She therefore remained alone in the house with the pretty maid, who has already been noticed. The servants who had received permission to visit the fair, had gone thither at about seven o'clock, after their mistress's dinner; and a short while afterwards the pretty maid might have been seen tripping across the garden—thence a little way along the road—to drop a couple of letters into the local post-office. The distance was not altogether a hundred yards: the pretty maid's absence did not therefore last above a few minutes: but still it was sufficient to afford the opportunity for a lurking villain who was on the watch, to glide into the house.

This was none other than Barney the Burker, in his Lascar disguise. He had seen Madame Angelique's men-servants at the fair: he had recognised them by their livery, which he had observed on the day when the carriage had passed him during his altercation with the Duke of Marchmont; and believing Madame Angelique to be well off, he thought he might as well profit by the comparatively unprotected state of her residence, now that he beheld the men-servants at the fair. He concluded that the woman whom he saw with them, was likewise a dependant of the ex-milliner's household; and taking care not to be seen by these domestics, he left them in the vicinage of the booths and stalls. Making the best of his way in the direction of the villa he came within sight of it at the very moment the maid-servant was tripping forth with her mistress's letters; and stealing through the garden at the back, Barney the Burker glided into the house. The kitchen was unoccupied at the moment: he traversed it—he entered the passage leading to the hall—the parlour-door happened to be standing ajar—he peeped in, and beheld Madame Angelique taking a comfortable nap upon the sofa, which was drawn near the table whereon wine and dessert appeared. There was no lamp in the room: but the light from the window was sufficient to reveal the Frenchwoman's sleeping form to the Burker's eyes He crept softly up the stairs; and entered a bed-chamber, which by its appearance was evidently that of Madame Angelique. There he remained for a minute or two, deliberating whether he should ransack the place at once and trust to circumstances to enable him to beat a retreat—or whether he should hide himself under the bed, and

by making his appearance before Madame Angelique in the middle of the night, extort from her terrors a far larger booty than he might perhaps succeed in obtaining from his own unassisted researches in the room. The sound of the back-door closing, and then the light trip of footsteps ascending the stairs, left the Burker no farther discretion in the affair. He comprehended that the pretty servant-maid had returned, and that she was most probably seeking her mistress's chamber to prepare it for the night: so he accordingly slipped at once under the couch. The girl entered, and was for some time busied in the chamber,—the Burker being in readiness to spring forth and seize her by the throat if she should by any chance happen to look under the bed. Little suspected the pretty maid that danger was so imminent; and it was perhaps fortunate for her that she did not plunge her eyes into the ruffian's place of ambush.

For upwards of half an hour did the maid-servant remain in that chamber—more, as it would seem, for the purpose of whiling away the time than for the completion of any actual work which she had to do; because this latter might have been compressed into a third of that space. Jane was a lively, happy girl, and sang to herself during the interval she remained there—unconscious as the bird upon the bough that the concealed, coiled-up reptile was in readiness to spring forth. At length she quitted the room, taking the light with her; and the Burker thought to himself that as he had remained there secure so long, it would perhaps be better worth his while to tarry until Madame Angelique should come up to the chamber—when, after sleep had fallen upon her eyes, he might steal forth, he might awaken her, and he might compel her to surrender up all the money and valuables she had in the house. By this plan, too, he would secure himself a safe egress in the midst of the night; whereas if he now plundered the chamber, and endeavoured to steal off, he might be perceived by either the maid or the mistress—an alarm might be raised—and his capture would be the result. All things considered therefore, the disguised Lascar preferred remaining where he was.

An hour passed—when the Burker heard Madame Angelique's steps in the hall below; and immediately afterwards her voice issued an instruction to the maid. This was to the effect that as Madame Angelique had made but a poor dinner, she fancied a lobster for her supper (for she was a very great gourmand); and Jane was desired to speed to the fishmonger's shop, which was at no great distance, and procure the coveted edible.

"Shall I first take up lights to the parlour, ma'am?" asked Jane, from the passage leading to the kitchen, which was on the ground floor, and not one of those odious subterraneans in which domestic servants are too often buried as if they were workers in miniature mines.

"No — wait till you come back," answered Madame Angelique: "but just give me a chamber-candle. You need not be afraid to go across to the fishmonger's: it is a beautiful clear evening, with the moon shining."

"Oh, I'm not afraid, ma'am," responded the pretty maid: and having given her mistress the lighted candle, she issued from the house.

Madame Angelique began mounting the stairs towards her chamber,—on reaching which she was about to change her evening toilet for a comfortable *deshabillée*, that she might all the more pleasantly abandon herself to the pleasure of the expected evening repast. But scarcely had she put the candle upon the drawers, when she was transfixed with horror on beholding a great coarse dusty boot protruding from beneath the drapery at the foot of the bed. For a moment she stood stupefied: then a cry escaped her lips—and she was making for the door, when her feet, kicking up the floor carpet, became entangled therein—and down she fell.

Out rushed the Burker from his hiding-place; and as the terrified woman rose to her knees, she found herself confronted by the villanous-looking Lascar whom a few days previously she had relieved, and who had attacked the Duke of Marchmont.

"Shriek out again, and you're a dead 'ooman!" said the Burker, in a terrible voice, as he raised his club in a menacing manner.

Nevertheless Madame Angelique did cry out as she knelt at the villain's feet: he uttered a tremendous execration, and was about to strike with all his force at her head, when she suddenly left off screaming, and said, "For God's sake don't murder me! I'll give you everything I've got!"

"That's common sense," said the Burker; "and now look sharp about it, so that you may sit down all cozy and comfortable to eat that there lobster which the gal's gone for."

Meanwhile Sir Frederick Latham had knocked at the front door: but the sound was not heard up in the room where this scene was taking place—for it was situated at the back of the house, the whole front of the first storey being used as a drawing-room. Immediately after the merchant's knock, screams pealed forth: Sir Frederick at once knew there must be something wrong—and he rushed round to the back part of the premises. There he found the kitchen door standing wide open, as Jane had left it on going forth: and he entered the house. On reaching the passage, he heard a gruff voice say, "Thirty-two sovereigns? Why, it's all gammon. A lady like you——"

"I assure you I have no more ready money in the house," Madame Angelique replied in accents of shuddering terror.

The gruff voice gave vent to some bitter imprecation; and Sir Frederick Latham, now feeling convinced that a robbery was being perpetrated in the house, stole up the staircase. It was so well carpeted that the sounds of his steps were not heard; and all in a moment he burst into the chamber where the ruffian was keeping Madame Angelique in a state of such awful alarm.

"Ah!" ejaculated Sir Frederick, as he caught sight of the Lascar's dress.

A cry of joy pealed forth from the lips of the ex-milliner: but with a savage growl did the Burker spring towards the merchant. Sir Frederick, who was far from deficient in courage, at once closed with him—Madame Angelique seized upon the miscreant from behind—and he was hurled upon the floor.

"Hold him tight, Sir Frederick," exclaimed the Frenchwoman, "while I run for the police!"

"Stop, I command you!" cried the merchant, with his knee upon the Burker's chest and his right hand at the miscreant's throat. "Remain here, Madame Angelique!—do you hear me, I say?—remain here!"

"But this villain, Sir Frederick——"

"Silence—and do as I bid you! Now shut the door."

The Frenchwoman—who was at present as much astonished as she was just now alarmed—did as she was desired; and Sir Frederick said to the Burker, "Answer me a question or two, and I will let you go. Refuse—and I hand you over to the police."

"The fust is the best," responded Barney, gasping for breath, and smitten with surprise that he should be thus spoken to. "Now then, sir, what is it?"

"The night before last," continued the merchant, "you had a certain scene on the road near Balham Hill; and you said to a nobleman—Lord Rushbrook—who had you in custody, '*What about the safe and the cash-box?*'—whereupon he at once let you go. Tell me the meaning of those words."

"And if I do," said the Burker, "how do I know——"

"That I shall let you go?" interrupted the merchant. "Is it not worth your while to trust to my promise? You cannot make your position worse—but you may make it better."

"True enough!" ejaculated Barney. "So here goes——But the gal will be coming back with the lobster——"

"Go you, madam," said the merchant, "and see that your domestics——"

"There's only one at home—the other is out," observed Barney.

"Go, then, madam—and keep the one domestic quiet," said Sir Frederick Latham. "Let nothing of all this be known! And fear nothing!—for this fellow is far more in my power than he fancies himself."

Madame Angelique quitted the chamber; and the merchant, without releasing the Burker from his prostrate position, hastened to say, "I have already told you on what conditions I am inclined to deal mercifully with you. Speak!—give me the explanation I have sought."

"I will, sir,—trusting to your goodness," responded the false Lascar. "You see, the fact is, sir—and there's no use in denying it—I thought as how the night you had that grand party would be a favourable one for me to do a little business in my way; and so I went to have a look about the premises: for it sometimes happens, you know, that genelman's servants theirselves has no objection to what we call a put-up affair——that means an arranged and planned robbery. Being rayther skilled in reading people's countenances, I could pretty easy tell which servants you may talk to in a particular way, and which you may not——"

"Well, well," interrupted Sir Frederick Latham, "you were lurking about my house the night of the party. What next?"

"I took the liberty of peeping in at a window," replied the Burker; "and what the deuce should I see, but a genelman helping hisself to a lot of notes and gold out of a kesh-box; and there was a safe a-standing open. Oh, ho! thinks I to myself——"

"Never mind what you thought," interrupted the City merchant. "Who was that gentleman?"

"Ah! sir, I knowed him pretty well," replied the Burker; "for the fact is, I'd met him before. He was your brother-in-law, as I've heerd tell—Lord Rushbrook."

"And he emptied the cash-box?" demanded Sir Frederick.

"That, by jingo, he did—and in no time too!" rejoined the Burker. "Then he put the kesh-box back into the safe; and just at that moment I do believe he twigged me a looking at him through the winder: for he gived such a start and turned as pale as death—but I bolted away like a shot. Of course I suspected in a moment he was doing summut he didn't ought to do; and so when I arterwards found myself in his power, I thought I'd just see what a little hint on the subject would produce; and bless you, sir, he let go his hold on me just for all the world as if he was dropping a hot tater."

"And now one word more," said the City merchant; "and you need not be afraid to answer me—for I have reason to know that you have just been telling me the truth, and I will keep my bargain with you. You had met Lord Rushbrook on a former occasion? Did you rob him *then*?—and if so, of how much? Now remember! if you tell me the truth, I am not going to take any step to make you disgorge your plunder: but I will suffer you to depart without any farther molestation."

"Well, sir, the fact is I *did* rob him," answered the Burker; "but it was a precious bad job for me—for like a cussed fool as I am, I lost all the money arterwards, and devilish near got myself took into the bargain."

"How much did you rob him of?" inquired Sir Frederick.

"Well, it was exactly two thousand pounds, all in bank-notes," answered the Burker. "As you may werry well suppose, I was astounded when I come to diskiver the amount; and as some of the notes was werry high ones—fifties and hundreds, I mean—I thought they was of no more use to me than the elephant was to the old genelman when he won it in a raffle. Howsomever, I recollected an old Jew that did a little business in that way—I mean who changed bank-notes without asking no questions; so off I posted to him. But what does the old scamp do but he gives me a lot of little notes, all five pounders—telling me he was only charging a hundred pounds for the job, and that I might think myself devilish lucky in having fallen into such hands. And so at first I did: but then, behold you, sir! when I afterwards tried to change one of the five pun' notes, the shopkeeper said as how it was a forgery and roared out for the police. If I hadn't given him a tap over the head and knocked him down senseless behind his own counter, it would have been all up with me. Howsomever, I got clear off: but every one of the notes the rascally old Jew had given me, was bad 'uns. I went to his quarters in the middle of the night with the intention of telling him a bit of my mind—and perhaps of giving *him* a tap too: but the waggabone had bolted; and so you see as how, sir, I was most cruelly robbed by that precious old scoundrel."

Sir Frederick had listened with much impatience to this long tale; but he thought he had better hear it to the end; and now that it was finished he had no more questions to ask. Keeping possession of the Burker's club, Sir Frederick rose from off his prostrate form; and stepping back in a manner which showed that he was prepared for any treacherous attack on the miscreant's part, he said, "You may now steal forth from the house. Proceed—I will follow! And beware how you are found again lurking in this neighbourhood, or in that of my own abode—for the police will have orders to take you into custody."

"Don't you be afeard, sir," answered the Burker; "I've had quite enow of these here parts of the country for the present."

The ruffian stole down the stairs,—Sir Frederick Latham following with the club in his hand, until he saw him safe out of the front door. Madame Angelique had in the meanwhile been talking to her pretty maid-servant in the kitchen,—the girl having returned from the neighbouring fishmonger's: but Jane was utterly unsuspicious of the incident which had occurred, and of the presence of the desperado in the house,—although it struck her that her mistress was somewhat flurried, and that it was likewise singular she should remain in conversation with her there. The ex-milliner heard the front door close; and she then quitted the kitchen. Rejoining Sir Frederick Latham in the hall, she conducted him into the parlour; and the merchant said, "You may perhaps think it strange, Madame Angelique, that I should have suffered that miscreant to escape: but as you heard a part of that conversation which I held with him, you may possibly have understood that I have a reason for dealing thus leniently. The truth is, he has given me some information which I was most anxious to obtain, and for which it was well worth my while to bribe him by means of his own freedom. More I need not say upon the subject——unless it be to enjoin the strictest secrecy on your part in respect to all that has thus occurred."

"I am sure, Sir Frederick," answered Madame Angelique, "after your kindness to me of this morning, you have only to express your wishes in order to have them fulfilled by me. But how came you at the house in the very nick of time——"

Sir Frederick explained that he had ridden across from Balham Hill, to ask some more questions in respect to the topic which had been discoursed upon in the morning: but Madame Angelique could give him no further explanations. She declared that she had never, to her knowledge, seen the paramour whom Lady Anastatia had occasionally met at her house; and in short, Sir Frederick Latham took his leave of the ex-milliner no wiser on that point than he was previous to this second visit.

But the mystery of the cash-box appeared to him to be now fully elucidated. Indeed, it was most natural for him to entertain the conviction that Anastatia had given Lord Rushbrook the key of the safe that he might help himself to its contents.

"And thus," said Sir Frederick to himself, as he rode homeward, "has my own wife enabled her own brother to rob me!—that wife who had already so grossly deceived me—that brother of her's whom I had already allowed to prey upon my purse! But there shall be an end of all this! Maledictions upon my folly in having married into one of the families of the aristocracy!"

CHAPTER CXXVII.

THE DENOUEMENT.

Sir Frederick Latham rose at an early hour in the morning, after having passed an almost sleepless night; and he immediately sent off one of his domestics on horseback to the residence of the Earl and Countess of Fordwich, to inquire after the health of the latter. It was not that Sir Frederick had the slightest consideration for the health of the Countess: his object in sending was to learn by indirect means when his wife Anastatia would be likely to return to Balham Hill—and whether the illness of her mother was of a severity calculated to detain her away from her home. Lady Anastatia sent back a note by the domestic,—wherein she cordially thanked her husband for his kindness in sending to inquire—she assured him that her mother, having passed a good night, was in a condition that inspired no further apprehension—and that she herself should be at Balham Hill by lunch time at two o'clock. On the receipt of this note, Sir Frederick sate down and penned a brief letter to his brother-in-law Lord Rushbrook, requesting him to call at Tudor House precisely at two o'clock, on business of considerable importance. Having sent off this letter, the City merchant walked forth into his grounds to deliberate again upon the plan which he had settled in his mind during the past night.

We should observe that Lord Rushbrook did not reside with his parents, but had apartments in some other fashionable quarter of the town. He did not know that his sister had passed the night beneath the paternal roof; and therefore instead of repairing thither to accompany her back to Balham Hill, he drove down in his own phaeton. It happened that the Viscount's equipage reached Tudor House only about five minutes before Lady Anastatia herself returned in her own carriage; and Sir Frederick Latham, who was watching from an arbour at the extremity of his grounds, was well pleased to observe that his brother-in-law and his wife accidentally reached Tudor House almost at the same instant. For he did not wish to be compelled to speak to one before the arrival of the other; and thus did circumstances favour his views in this respect.

The Viscount—who could not altogether conjecture what Sir Frederick wanted with him, but whose guilty conscience was nevertheless haunted by fears and misgivings—at once inquired for his brother-in-law and was informed that Sir Frederick had left word that he should be in punctually at two o'clock. While lingering upon the steps of the mansion to ask additional questions, the Viscount beheld Anastatia's equipage approach; and as he helped his sister to alight, he learnt from her lips that she had been since the previous day in attendance upon their mother.

"Sir Frederick has written, desiring me to be here at this hour," said the Viscount; "and he tells me in his letter that it is upon important business. I wonder what on earth the business can be?"

"If you cannot conjecture it, Robert," answered his sister, "you may be assured that I am still less able; for Sir Frederick seldom or never speaks to me upon matters of business. Let us go and seek him. Perhaps we shall find him in his study?"

"No," answered the Viscount; "he is out—but will be in at two o'clock. It wants ten minutes," he added, referring to his watch.

"I will hasten up-stairs to make some little change in my toilet," said Lady Anastatia: "and I will join you in the room where luncheon is served. I am happy to inform you, Robert, that our mother is now out of danger: but last evening she was in a state that filled me with the greatest apprehension. She might have died, Robert, before you would have come to inquire after her!"

"No one ever sent to tell me she was ill," replied the Viscount carelessly; "or if such a message were left at my lodgings, it was not delivered."

Anastatia heaved a profound sigh as she bent upon her brother a reproachful look, which was as much as to say that she feared all affectionate interest on behalf of his relatives was waning in his breast: but without another word she hastened up to her chamber, where she made some change in her toilet,—little suspecting the while that a storm was about to burst over her head. In about a quarter of an hour she repaired to the apartment where the luncheon was served up, and where she found her brother standing at the window.

"Here comes Sir Frederick!" he said; "he is just this moment entering the house. I waved my hand to him—but he did not appear to notice it. He is a singular fellow at times, this husband of your's, Anastatia!"

"He has been very munificent towards you, Robert," said the lady, in a tone of rebuke and reproach.

"Oh, as for that —— But hush! here he comes!"

The door opened; and Sir Frederick made his appearance. Anastatia was about to hasten towards him, when she was suddenly struck by the extreme paleness of his countenance, and by his stern repelling demeanour. Lord Rushbrook failed not likewise to observe his brother-in-law's aspect; and the misgiving which had been floating in his mind, expanded into an absolute terror.

"Is anything the matter, Sir Frederick?" inquired Lady Anastatia, not daring to advance towards that husband who, instead of giving her encouragement so to do, appeared by his very look to repel her.

The merchant deliberately closed the door; and looking from his wife towards the Viscount—then back again at his wife—he surveyed them both with a gaze wherein scorn, contempt, indignation, and aversion were all commingled. Rushbrook was ready to sink with terror—for he now felt assured that the secret of the cash-box had by some means transpired: while Anastatia was smitten with the idea that something fresh had happened in respect to Shadbolt and Madame Angelique.

"Sit down, both of you," said the merchant, at length breaking silence, and speaking in a voice of cold command. "I have certain observations to make—and it is possible they may extend to some length."

"But my dear husband," said Lady Anastatia, advancing a step or two with trembling hesitation, "your manner is so singular——"

"Do you find it so, madam?" he asked, flinging upon her a bitter look. "It is not likely to improve as I proceed with the observations I have to make. But sit down, I say—and listen to me."

Anastatia sank upon a chair; and the tears began to trickle down her cheeks. Lord Rushbrook, overwhelmed with terror and confusion, drew forth his kerchief and fidgeted nervously with it: but his countenance the while was of corpse-like ghastliness.

"The reflection of your guilty consciences is visible in your looks," proceeded Sir Frederick Latham, slowly turning his eyes from one to the other.

Anastatia gave a sudden start—echoed the word "Guilty!"—and then sinking back in her seat, appeared as if about to faint: for all vital colouring quitted her cheeks. But still she did not completely lose her consciousness, though a seal had suddenly been placed upon her lips by the feelings which were overpowering her.

"You will admit," continued Sir Frederick in a tone of withering sarcasm, "that it is a splendid family into which I have married, and that I ought to be supremely proud of so brilliant an aristocratic connexion! No—instead of being proud of it, I have learnt to loathe and hate it, and to curse the day on which I was guilty of such besotted folly. But I will tell you where my pride *does* exist! It is in a regard for the opinion of the world; for I would not have that world know how egregiously, how miserably I have been duped! Therefore must the step I am about to take be in a measure glossed over. An excuse—a plea—a reason in such cases need never be wanting. Your temper and mine do not suit each other, Lady Anastatia," continued Sir Frederick, with a sort of sardonic mockery that was little consistent with his usual demeanour and accents; "and therefore we have agreed to separate."

"Separate?" cried Anastatia with another start; and it was now with a sort of wild bewilderment that she gazed upon her husband.

"Yes—separate!" rejoined Sir Frederick, who all in an instant had recovered his habitual coldness. "You know how you have deceived me—I might use far severer and harsher expressions—but it is not worth while—you cannot fail to comprehend my meaning——"

"My God!" moaned the wretched Anastatia, clasping her hands in anguish. "I admit that I have deceived you! I have been very culpable! ——But this chastisement is terrible! Oh, whatsoever plea be put forward, the world will look upon me as disgraced! Suspicion and scorn ever attach themselves to a woman who is separated from her husband. O, Sir Frederick——"

But here her voice was lost in piteous sighs and sobs; and so convulsed became her bosom that it seemed as if it must burst.

"As for you, my lord," continued the merchant, cold and implacable, as he averted his looks from his agonized wife and turned them upon her brother, "you will find a ready apology for never again seeking my presence. The brother of a woman who is separated from her husband, is supposed to take the woman's part; and you need not hesitate, Lord Rushbrook, to proclaim that you can never more think of speaking to me after my conduct to your sister. I shall not contradict your statement. Let me rather pass in the world as being harsh, arbitrary, and cruel, if you will: but let me not be regarded as that which I really am—a miserable, despicable, contemptible dupe!"

"My God!" murmured Anastatia: and she wrung her hands with anguish.

"So you see, my lord," continued Sir Frederick Latham, "you have an easy game to play; and so long as you play it in the manner I am now dictating, your own secrets will be safe with me. But if through malice or by accident you ever let slip a syllable which shall unveil me as a dupe—if you ever breathe a word which may raise a suspicion as to how I have been deceived by this accursed marriage of mine—that moment will I proclaim the whole truth to the world! Yes, I will proclaim it to the world—I will tell how you, Lord Rushbrook, played the part of a vile felon, a villanous robber in my house——"

A half-stifled shriek and another galvanic start denoted the exquisitely excruciating torture which Anastatia was experiencing; and then her half wild, half dismayed looks wandered from the countenance of her husband to that of her brother.

"Hush, hush—for God's sake, hush!" exclaimed the Viscount, starting up from his seat with a face that was livid through mingled terror, confusion, and shame, as he glanced in a frightened manner towards his sister, and entreatingly to his brother-in-law.

"Lord Rushbrook," said the implacable merchant, still outwardly cold, though inwardly experiencing a burning joy at being enabled to humble the haughty pride of a scion of that aristocratic family into which he had married,—"I tell you that you may proclaim to the world whatsoever you will in respect to my harsh temper: but I repeat that you must beware how you expose me as a victim and a dupe, lest I on my side proclaim that on the night of the grand entertainment at Tudor House, you, Lord Rushbrook——"

"Sir Frederick, for mercy's sake, Sir Frederick!"—and the Viscount was reduced to the most abject condition of an entreating wretch.

"That on the night of the grand entertainment at Tudor House," proceeded the merciless Latham, "you stole into my study——"

"Sir Frederick!" moaned the Viscount.

"And you plundered me of many hundreds of pounds——"

"My God!"—and Rushbrook sank back annihilated upon his seat.

"What is this that I hear?" almost shrieked forth Anastatia, as she started up with wild looks. "Sir Frederick—Robert—speak—tell me——"

"It means, madam," responded her husband—though he himself was somewhat bewildered whether his wife were playing a part, or whether she could after all have been innocent of any complicity with her brother in respect to the robbery,—"it means, madam, that on the night when I entrusted the key of my safe to you, that you might take thence a certain sum of money—whatsoever might answer your purpose at the time——"

"And without hearing any more," exclaimed Anastatia,—"without understanding what your allusions meant—I declare here, in your presence, Sir Frederick—in the presence too of my brother—as solemnly as I would declare if standing in the presence of my God—that I took from your safe a sum less than six hundred pounds, and that I left twice or thrice as much in the cash-box—though I had not the curiosity to calculate how much."

"But the key, Anastatia—the key?" said the merchant, half suspiciously and half in the uncertainty of bewilderment: "how was it that the key found its way to the hand of another, and *that other* your brother Lord Rushbrook?"

"Sir Frederick, for heaven's sake, press not these queries," murmured the Viscount, advancing towards his brother-in law, laying his hand upon his arm, and looking up into his face with an expression of the most anguished entreaty.

"Good heavens, Robert, what am I to think?" shrieked forth Anastatia: "what am I to understand by all this? It is some horrible mystery!—Ah! the key you spoke to me of—the key, Sir Frederick? Oh! I remember that on the night of the party I dropped it—I lost it for awhile—but I found it again—methought it was in the same spot where I might have dropped it. Oh, Sir Frederick! you remember that I offered it to you immediately after I ascended from your study to the ball-room? Would to heaven that you had taken it then! But tell me, Robert—what in heaven's name does it all mean?"

"Ah! you may well ask that question," exclaimed Sir Frederick Latham, now getting excited; "for everything must be cleared up! You lost that key, you say, Anastatia?"—then turning towards the Viscount, the merchant looked him steadfastly in the face, adding, "And you found it?"

"Mercy!" moaned the wretched nobleman, hanging down his head: but the next instant recovering something like his habitual insolent confidence, he said, "I thought I might make use of your friendship—it was merely as a loan—I took it—I meant to have told you—but such a trifle slipped my memory——"

Sir Frederick Latham turned his back upon the Viscount: it was with the coldest scorn that he did so: he disdained a reply to such a wretched tissue of sophistical excuses: he would have considered himself degraded by offering a comment upon them.

"Anastatia," he said, but speaking distantly and severely, "it is evident I have done you wrong in this instance. Circumstances were however against you. A felon brother makes his own infamy to redound upon his sister. Would that I were enabled to demand your pardon for the suspicion which in this respect had naturally arisen in my mind, but which after all has turned out to be so unjust towards yourself. It is true that you have not conspired to plunder me: but you well know, Anastatia, that there can be no doubt as to your guilt in another respect. Just now you admitted that you had been very culpable towards me. Therefore must we separate!"

"Is there no pardon—no forgiveness?" asked Anastatia in bitterest anguish of mind, at the same time joining her hands in the most fervid appeal. "I know that I deceived you——"

"Enough, Anastatia!" interrupted the merchant, with an implacable expression of countenance, though inwardly he was moved: "the very subject itself forbids discussion! I do not say to you, 'Go with that felon brother of your's!'—but I bid you depart hence in the course of this day. *He* is about to relieve my dwelling of the pestilential atmosphere which hangs around his criminal presence."

"Sir Frederick, you must be obeyed," faltered Anastatia, the tears streaming down her cheeks, and her bosom convulsed with sobs: "and perhaps I deserve it all for having concealed that secret from you. But still methinks the chastisement is severe—it is a terrible one for an imprudence——"

"An imprudence, Anastatia?" cried the merchant angrily. "Dare you thus lightly denominate the profligacy——you see that you compel me to speak out——"

"Sir Frederick," interrupted Lady Anastatia, suddenly dashing away her tears, and drawing herself up with an air of feminine dignity blended with indignation,—"this is language which even from you I cannot and will not tolerate! I repeat, my conduct was marked with imprudence perhaps—but only in one sense. It was because on the day when—a year back—you desired me to desist from dealing with Madame Angelique, and when you hinted at the reasons, I did not frankly confess to you at the time that in utter ignorance of the character of that establishment——"

"Good heavens! what is this that I hear?" exclaimed Sir Frederick: and he literally staggered back as if smitten a blow. "Speak, Anastatia!—tell me! The person whom you met there—he whom before your marriage as well as subsequently——"

"Ask him, Sir Frederick—ask him!" exclaimed Anastatia: "he is here—he will tell the truth—he will not see his own sister trampled down into the dust! Ask him, I say, who it was that I met at Madame Angelique's house!"

But Sir Frederick Latham waited not for whatsoever response the Viscount would have given to this appeal. A wild cry of joy burst from the lips of the City merchant: it seemed as if all in a moment his nature had become changed: his business-like coldness vanished—his countenance grew full of the expression of excited feelings; and flinging his arms round Anastatia's neck, he exclaimed, "Pardon! pardon!"

It was now a most affecting scene. That proud scion of the moneyocracy was melted at the blissful thought that his wife, the lovely daughter of the aristocracy, was after all worthy of him;—and *she* forgot everything except the one idea that she was restored to her husband's confidence. And both alike forgot for several minutes the presence of Lord Rushbrook, who, retreating into a window recess, sat watching this scene with an interest which though deep, was nevertheless altogether selfish; for it occurred to him that while there was peace-making in one quarter, there might be forgiveness for himself.

And now Sir Frederick Latham led his wife into another window-recess; and there they sat down and conversed together. It was the moment for explanations; and Anastatia's were given in the following manner:—

"You remember, my dear husband, that the first incident which rendered you intimate with our family, was that dreadful circumstance of my brother's crime—the forgery which he committed in the name of the Marquis of Swalecliffe. That bill fell into your hands: my father went to you—and you promised to save my brother from exposure. But the Marquis of Swalecliffe himself appeared to be inexorable. My brother was not really upon the Continent; he was concealed at the house of his tailor, M. Bertin. Oh, how painful it is for me to review all these things! And yet it is needful now: for the explanation must be given. Yes—do not interrupt me: I will proceed. My father and mother had vowed that never again would they see Robert: he dared not come to the house—he dared not go to you:—what was he to do in that fearful dilemma? He wrote a letter to me: he besought me to meet him: he told me that my own milliner, who lived next door to his temporary lodging, would arrange an interview. Utterly unsuspicious of the frightful risk which my reputation was incurring, I went to Madame Angelique's. I dared not mention my brother's name: for he knew not at the time, nor did I, whether the Marquis of Swalecliffe might not have given information to the police to capture him; and it was therefore requisite to use every possible precaution. I merely asked for the gentleman who was waiting to see me. Oh, that Robert should have so frightfully perilled the good name of his own sister!"

Anastatia's tears rained down her cheeks. Sir Frederick, with more kindness than he had ever displayed towards her, besought her to desist from her explanations, for that he himself was perfectly satisfied: but again wiping away her tears, she insisted upon proceeding.

"I saw Robert there—I met him in that place, which I little indeed suspected to be a scene of gilded infamy. He wrote a letter to the Marquis of Swalecliffe, dated from Brussels, and beseeching him to be merciful. This letter Robert implored me to forward to the Marquis, with a note from myself to the effect that I would receive whatsoever reply his lordship might vouchsafe. In that note which I penned to the Marquis, I added a prayer in support of the one my brother had already addressed to him. His lordship sent me a prompt answer. He said that for my sake he would do that which otherwise he had been resolved not to do. It was necessary that I should see my brother again, to communicate this response; and I saw him at the same place. Two or three times subsequently I saw him there, to report how the negotiation was progressing with yourself. Through your means the difficulty was settled, and my brother in due time affected to have returned from the Continent. Now, my dear husband, you comprehend how it was that I visited the interior of Madame Angelique's establishment on a few occasions prior to my marriage."

"And doubtless, Anastatia," observed Sir Frederick, "it was for a similar reason, after marriage, when your profligate brother again fell into difficulties, and when some usurious attorney threatened to proceed against him criminally——"

"Yes," responded Anastatia, "again did he pretend to fly to the Continent—again was it given out that he had gone to Paris or Brussels, that the officers of the law might be thrown off the scent. You remember, my dear husband, you strictly forbade me to hold any communication with my brother: but what could I do when he privately transmitted to me the most pathetic letters, declaring that he was in poverty—imploring me to see him? In a word, I went! Alas, it was so easy to pretext a visit to my milliner's; and as heaven is my witness, I suspected not the character of that house! And I am convinced, my dear husband, that by many and many a lady-friend of mine was its character equally unsuspected——"

"No doubt, Anastatia," interjected Sir Frederick; "and it was by the merest accident that I myself one day learnt from the impertinent communicativeness of some fashionable debauchee the infamous traffic which Madame Angelique was carrying on. I was astounded; and as a matter of duty I at once warned you of the character of that house."

"And I also was astounded!" answered Anastatia; "and I had not the moral courage to make you that confession which, if candidly given at the time, would have saved us so much misery to-day. But a sense of shame—deep burning shame,—or shall I say wounded modesty—sealed my tongue. I could not look my husband in the face and confess to him that I had penetrated within the walls of that den of infamy. I therefore held my peace. But, Oh! when next I saw my brother, how bitterly did I reproach him for the frightful risk which he had made me run! Alas! you know his manner—he endeavoured to laugh it flippantly away—and then he pleaded ignorance of the nature of that establishment; and if I did not altogether believe him, at least I forgave him. Yet ever since that day on which your revelation of the infamy of that establishment came like a thunderbolt upon my ears, I have been haunted with terrors lest you should discover that only secret of my life which I studied to conceal from you. At last the extortioner came; and then a great battle took place within me. I longed to reveal everything to you: but I had not the moral courage to do it. Alas, no! I had not!—and I submitted to that villanous demand. You know the rest."

"And now, my dear Anastatia," responded Sir Frederick, taking his wife's hand and pressing it to his lips, "it is my turn to give you explanations. I will tell you how my suspicions were aroused—how they were strengthened—how they were fostered."

Sir Frederick accordingly narrated all those incidents which have been described to the reader,—how he had first missed the contents of his cash-box—how he had examined the papers in the desk—how he had visited Madame Angelique—how he had traced some of his lost bank-notes to Lord Rushbrook's possession—and how he had discovered the final secret from the false Lascar.

"It is I who have now to ask your pardon, my Anastatia," added the merchant, "for having violated the sanctity of your writing desk."

"You were justified," answered the lady; "and moreover this is not merely the day of revelations, but also the day of forgiveness."

"And to a certain extent," rejoined Sir Frederick,—"for your sake—at least so far as forgiveness in such circumstances *can* extend—shall it be accorded to that guilty one who has been the cause of so much mischief."

Meanwhile Lord Rushbrook had remained sitting in the window-recess: but he had not caught a single syllable of all that was thus taking place between his sister and his brother-in-law. The merchant approached him, and spoke in the following terms:—

"It were a mere waste of words to endeavour to reason with your lordship upon the profligacies and villanies of the career which you have been pursuing. The perils and difficulties of the past operate not with you as a salutary warning for the present or the future. What conduct could have been more abominable than your's when you would even have sacrificed the reputation of your own sister to the selfishness of your personal safety? Because you could not stir abroad at the time, you induced her to meet you in a place of infamy,—where, if you had the ordinary feelings of a man, your blood would boil with indignation at the idea of your pure-minded sister ever having set her foot! I fear that you are incorrigible, my lord; for this last act of your's—the robbery of your own sister's husband—a felon's foulest crime—proves you to be so thoroughly black-hearted and unprincipled that there is no hope for you!"

Anastatia had remained in the window-recess, where she was now weeping and sobbing: the sounds of her grief were wafted to the ear of her husband; and Sir Frederick, turning upon her a look of such kindness and compassion as never before he had displayed, said, "Weep not, Anastatia!—your brother is not worthy of these tears!"

Viscount Rushbrook, having a presentiment that something was about to be done for him, thought it better to preserve the humblest demeanour; and indeed he was completely overwhelmed with shame and confusion, notwithstanding his recent endeavour to carry off the affair with an insolent self-sufficient flippancy.

"I know that I have behaved bad, Sir Frederick," he said: "but look at my position! An appearance to keep up, and nothing to maintain it with—or at least only such a beggarly income that any small tradesman is better off than I! Come—you have said enough in the shape of reproach——I am glad it is all right between you and Anastatia——"

"Lord Rushbrook, listen to me!" interrupted the merchant; "for this scene shall now be brought to an end. It is totally impossible that you can ever again set foot within these walls: nor will I permit you—if it be possible for me to prevent it—to remain in the British metropolis, where your proceedings are so incessantly calculated to damage every one who is connected with you. I have a proposition to make: accept or refuse it as you will. If you choose to go upon the Continent, I will make you an allowance of one thousand pounds a year: but it shall be paid in monthly portions, and only to yourself personally—not by written order nor cheque—so that there may be a guarantee that you remain altogether in Paris, or wheresoever else you may choose to fix your abode. But if, on the other hand, you refuse this proposition, I warn you, Lord Rushbrook, that you will receive no farther pecuniary assistance from me; and whatsoever difficulty you may plunge yourself into, you must bear the consequences of. Decide this moment!—and if you accept my terms, you will leave the British metropolis to-morrow."

We need hardly inform the reader that Viscount Rushbrook was only too glad to accept an offer which promised him so liberal a permanent addition to the limited allowance he received from his father; and he took his departure from Tudor House.

When he was gone, Anastatia expressed her warmest gratitude to her husband for the munificence he had thus displayed towards her brother, as well as for his great leniency and forbearance in tacitly pardoning him for the foul robbery which had been brought to light.

"These incidents, my dear Anastatia," answered the merchant, "although so painful, may not have been without their uses. In the first place, your erring brother will be compelled to leave London, where he has constantly disgraced and imperilled himself; and let us hope that with a handsome income in a foreign clime, he may enter upon a new path. In the second place, your soul, Anastatia, is now relieved from the necessity of maintaining a secret which you were always afraid would transpire; and in the third place, methinks that our hearts have been drawn nearer towards each other than ever they were before. Certain it is that I feel different towards you! There may have been pride and coolness in my former demeanour—I have treated you too little as a wife and a friend: but henceforth it shall be different!"

Anastatia threw herself into her husband's arms; and he folded her to his breast with a real and loving tenderness.

DAME ROQUETTE.

CHAPTER CXXVIII.

THE STETHOSCOPE.

We must now return to that Chateau in the south of France, where Lady Octavian Meredith had for some while been staying with M. Volney and his daughter Clarine. The reader will not have forgotten the many extraordinary incidents which were revealed to Zoe's knowledge at that Chateau,—how M. Volney had, long years back, amidst the wild sublimities of Alpine scenery, taken the life of the author of his dishonour—and how Alfred Delorme, the son of that murdered victim, had been led by a variety of circumstances to bestow his love upon Clarine. It was through Zoe's representations, be it likewise remembered, that M. Volney had finally assented to the union of his daughter with the young Viscount Delorme: but he resolved that immediately after the bridal he would repair to some far-off spot,—there to bury himself and his sorrows, as well as his remorse, for the remainder of his existence. But to Zoe only was M. Volney's dreadful secret communicated: Clarine remained in perfect ignorance of the stupendous crime that sat upon her father's soul; while Alfred Delorme was equally far from suspecting that the father of her whom he loved and wooed, was his own deceased sire's murderer.

On the night when Alfred Delorme's presence in the Chateau was discovered, he had penetrated thither in a fit of utter desperation, to obtain an interview with Clarine that he might induce her to revoke the decision she had conveyed to him in the letter she had penned to old Marguerite's dictation. He was in a state of mind which forbade the exercise of the prudence and caution previously observed in his stealthy visits to the chateau; and thus was his presence detected. But, after all, the incident was a fortunate one, inasmuch as it brought about the *dénouement* we have already described; and on the morning after that eventful night, Alfred Delorme repaired to the chateau to learn M. Volney's decision. It was given; and he beheld himself the acknowledged suitor for the hand of Clarine. M. Volney proposed that the bridal should be celebrated with the least possible delay; and this was a proposition to which the young couple were by no means likely to offer any objection.

A fortnight passed; and Alfred Delorme was a daily visitor at the Chateau. M. Volney had a difficult as well as painful part to play. Zoe comprehended it: she could not help pitying him—but she regarded it as a portion of that chastisement which heaven decreed that he should experience in this world for the crime he had committed. In order to avoid the suspicion that he any longer objected to the marriage of his daughter with that young nobleman—in order likewise to avoid throwing a damp upon the spirits of the loving couple—M. Volney forced himself to be frequently in their society; so that he was now more in the sitting-room and less in his own study than was his wont at any other period during his residence at the Chateau. But what efforts it cost him to look Alfred Delorme calmly in the face—to meet the looks of him whom his own hand had rendered fatherless!

A fortnight had passed, we said—and it was now the eve of the day fixed for the bridal. This was to be solemnized with comparative privacy; and after the ceremony the Viscount was to bear his bride away to his own palatial mansion in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau. To Zoe only had M. Volney spoken of his own intentions—namely, to repair to some distant and retired spot, where he might dwell for the remainder of his existence. Clarine and the Viscount thought that he purposed to continue at the Chateau; and they entertained the hope that in process of time he would return to his own seat, also in the vicinage of Fontainebleau. As for Zoe herself,—she had agreed to accompany her friend Clarine and the Viscount to their future home, and there to remain with them for a few weeks, until she should have formed some other plan for her future arrangements.

It was the eve of the bridal—the month of September was drawing towards a close—and on a beautiful afternoon Zoe and Clarine were walking forth together. Alfred had passed several hours that day, as usual, at the Chateau; and he had then gone to some neighbouring town, to make a few purchases of such articles as he required for wedding-presents, and which could not be obtained in the village. Thus was it that the two young ladies were rambling alone together amidst that beautiful scenery in the neighbourhood of the Pyrenees.

"To-morrow, my dear Clarine," said Lady Octavian Meredith, "will be a happy day for you! You will accompany to the altar one who is in every way worthy of the devoted love you bear him; and you are about to enter on a complete change of existence. It is no longer in a lonely chateau that you will henceforth reside—but in a sumptuous mansion——"

"And you will accompany me thither, my dearest friend!" said the happy and grateful Clarine; "and though you have hinted at other arrangements to be carried into effect after a while, yet shall I hope to keep you altogether with me until——"

But here Clarine stopped short,—evidently aware that the enthusiasm of her feelings towards her friend Zoe had borne her suddenly upon the frontier of delicate ground.

"Until a change takes place in my own position, you would say?" observed Lady Octavian, in accents of mildest melancholy. "If you mean, dear Clarine, that happiness with my husband yet awaits me in this world, you are mistaken——Oh, you are mistaken! The only change to which I now look forward, is that which the hand of death itself must accomplish."

"Speak not thus, my beloved friend!" exclaimed Clarine, the tears trickling down her cheeks: "you know not how it afflicts me to listen to these mournful presentiments from your lips. You are so mild and resigned——"

"Yes—resigned," observed Zoe, "because with Christian fortitude can I look my destiny in the face."

"If you were to give way to lamentations and repinings, and to vehement outbursts," continued Clarine, "they would not have upon me the same effect which this mild placid melancholy of your's produces. Oh! believe me, dearest Zoe, I feel deeply, deeply on your account! Therefore pray listen to me. I am convinced that you entertain unfounded ideas in respect to your own health. The mind is suffering; and in its sufferings influences the body: but if the mind were restored to its natural tone, the physical sufferings would themselves cease. You have lately looked better than I have seen you ever since you first came to the Chateau. There is a colour upon your cheeks ——Now do not interrupt me!—not for worlds would I deceive you—and I positively declare that it is not a hectic glow, spot-like and unnatural—but it is a natural bloom shading gradually off——"

"Enough, Clarine!" interrupted Zoe gently. "I comprehend the excellence of your motive—I appreciate all your kindness. But there is within me a feeling, which I cannot explain, but which is nevertheless an unmistakable warning——"

"Would to heaven," exclaimed Clarine vehemently, "that you would take proper professional advice upon this subject! If it be really as you think, there can be no harm in your receiving the conviction that it is so: but if, on the other hand, you should find that you have deceived yourself—Ah, dearest Zoe! will it not be your duty to cling to life? Did you not a little while back assure me that if you were walking on the edge of a precipice, and that if there were danger of your falling into the abyss, you would retreat rapidly,—because you hold life to be a sacred gift from heaven—a gift which you are to preserve with all possible care until it be taken away from you by Him who originally gave it!"

"This is true, Clarine!" answered Zoe, slowly and thoughtfully.

"Therefore, my beloved friend," continued Mademoiselle Volney, "however bitter may be your cup of affliction, you are too good and have too profound a sense of your religious obligation, to put an end to your own existence. But, on the other hand, ought you to suffer yourself to fade and perish prematurely, if there be on earth the means of restoration? That God who breathed into our mortal clay the breath of life, has stored the world with herbs and minerals and various substances, expressly intended for the preservation of that life by warding off disease, or grappling with it and conquering it; and within the scope of human intelligence he has given a skill for comprehending how all these curatives and preventives may be used. What is more beautiful than the medical art?—does it not, with all its appliances and its wondrous capabilities, prove itself to be an effluence from heaven?—and does not the mere existence of that art teach us the highest moral lessons? If we may not suddenly escape from life by means of suicide, neither must we suffer ourselves to perish under the influence of illness or disease without invoking the aid of that sublime art which heaven has associated with the destiny of man."

Zoe listened with mingled interest, admiration, and solemnity, to the eloquent language which was thus flowing from her friend's lips. She recognised all the truthfulness of the reasoning: the whole matter assumed a new aspect to her view; and her soul received the conviction that if she felt it to be wrong to harbour even the slightest thought of self-destruction, it was scarcely less repugnant to the will of heaven to yield herself up to the ravages of disease without a single effort to baffle them.

"You have convinced me, my dear Clarine!" Zoe at length said, in a low deep voice: "you have opened my eyes to a new and sublime truth! Yes—I will follow your counsel——"

Clarine, in the enthusiasm of her joyous feelings, caught Zoe's hands in her own, and pressed them fervidly.

"This very day—this very hour, dearest, dearest friend," cried Mademoiselle Volney, "must you enter upon this new path. Do you not remember Alfred told us yesterday that Baron Louis, the celebrated Parisian physician—he who has acquired such renown in the use of the stethoscope—has arrived in the village to pass a few weeks for the benefit of his own health? Come at once!—let us proceed to his residence! Nothing will now satisfy me until you have received this eminent man's opinion!"

After all that had just taken place—with the new impression upon her mind—and considering the assurances she had within the last few minutes given to her friend, Zoe could not possibly refuse the proposition that was thus made. They were close upon the outskirt of the village; and in the neighbourhood was the picturesque little villa which Baron Louis had hired for the few weeks he purposed to remain in that district. With a palpitating heart Zoe suffered herself to be led along; and with enthusiastic hopefulness did Clarine conduct her beloved friend towards the villa. It was now about five o'clock in the afternoon; and Baron Louis was just returning from an excursion on horseback. On learning the object of the two ladies—or rather we should say one of them—he courteously invited them to enter,—though with a smile giving them to understand that when visiting this Pyrenean district he had no thought of pursuing his professional avocations. Zoe would have retired: but the zealous Clarine led her onward; and they entered the neatly furnished parlour of the villa.

Baron Louis awaited such explanations as Lady Octavian Meredith might have to give him. She hesitated and spoke nervously: but Clarine came to her aid. The young lady said enough to make the physician comprehend that Zoe had certain causes for sorrow and unhappiness, and that she had recently fancied she was labouring under a pulmonary complaint. The Baron proceeded to make the usual examination by means of the stethoscope; and Clarine awaited the result with perhaps far more anxiety than that which Zoe herself experienced. At length the opinion was delivered; and it was to the effect that Lady Octavian Meredith needed naught but skilful and competent professional treatment in order to be restored to perfect physical health. Zoe was well nigh overcome by her feelings on receiving this intelligence: but Clarine clapped her hands with an almost childish ebullition of joy, and folded her beloved friend in her arms.

When the first gush of feelings on the part of the young ladies was over and when they grew somewhat more composed, they both thanked the learned physician for the trouble he had taken and the delicate kindness he had shown in the proceeding; and then Zoe placed a considerable fee upon the mantel-piece. But Baron Louis would not accept the amount: he declared, with all that exquisite politeness which characterizes a French gentleman, that not being in this neighbourhood for a professional purpose, he could only exercise his skill in the way of friendship, and therefore would not think of being rewarded. In short, he used so many arguments that it was impossible for Zoe to persevere in her endeavour to force the fee upon him; and with renewed expressions of gratitude she took her departure, accompanied by her friend Clarine.

"I know not, my dear Zoe," said Mademoiselle Volney, as they were returning homeward to the Chateau, "that I ever experienced more heartfelt satisfaction than at the instant when this good and kind man pronounced his opinion. Oh, what a change of prospect is now opened before your mental vision! But good heavens! you are weeping —— Oh! how you are weeping, my sweet friend!—and there is an agony in the source of these tears!"

"If it be heaven's will that my life should be prolonged to a span greater than I had anticipated," answered Lady Octavian Meredith, "I must submit. But, Oh, Clarine! how can you expect me to be joyous and happy? There might have been that feeling for a moment—and yet I know not whether there was: but now that I have leisure for reflection, I am compelled to ask myself —and I ask you likewise—what have I worth living for?"

"You must live in the hope that happiness may yet be your's," replied Mademoiselle Volney. "Ah! my dear friend, I am about to say some thing which costs me a pang: but I am impelled by a sense of duty. I love you: a variety of circumstances has tended to establish a firm bond of friendship and affection between us—a bond which, I hope, death alone shall be enabled to break; and therefore does it afflict me to think of separation. Nevertheless we must separate — and perhaps sooner too than I had expected—because, my dear Zoe, it is your duty to return to your husband."

"What! to render him unhappy?" exclaimed Lady Octavian. "Ah, my dear Clarine! if that physician has just now told me that I may expect to live, you are on the other hand telling me how to invite the presence of death in the shortest and most effective manner; for my heart would break if I were to return to England to encounter all that I passed through for some months ere I came upon the Continent! I had hoped to die soon, Clarine —— yes, I had hoped to die soon — in order that I might leave Octavian free to follow the bent of his own inclinations."

"You have already made too many sacrifices on that point, dear Zoe; and you must make no more. It is not for you to martyrize yourself utterly and completely for the sake of others: but it is for *them* to make sacrifices also. Have you not told me that your husband is naturally good and generous, and that Christina Ashton is herself a model of purity and virtue?—and if it is with such beings that you have to deal, wherefore should all the sufferings and the sacrifices be upon your side? Think you that your husband will not do everything to conquer his own passion?—and think you that Christina's sense of delicacy, her feminine pride, and her good feeling, have not already led her to stifle whatsoever love Lord Octavian may have inspired her with?"

"Ah, Clarine!" responded Zoe, "can you ask me these questions,—you who have loved and still love so tenderly and so well? Did you find it so easy to stifle love in your bosom? did even a father's mandates or injunctions ——"

"Zoe," interrupted Clarine, speaking in a low half-hushed voice, "it is the truth which you are proclaiming from your lips; and everything you state affords an additional proof of the weakness of us poor mortals. But, good heavens! what will you do? The skill of science has just ascertained the fact that your young life may be prolonged until it grows old: and are you to pass all these years in misery—voluntarily separated from the husband whom you love—expatriated afar from your sire, your friends, and acquaintances? Oh, the affection which I bear for you might prompt me selfishly to rejoice at the prospect of having you altogether and for ever with me: but, on the other hand, I have a regard for your happiness; and that very friendship which I experience for you, will prevent me from seeing you make the most unheard-of sacrifices, and martyrizing yourself to an extent that has no parallel in the history of woman!"

"And yet," said Zoe, in that same sweet voice of mild resignation in which for a long time past she had been accustomed to speak, "those sacrifices must be made—that self-martyrization must be accomplished! If circumstances prevent me from ensuring my own happiness, I may at least be permitted the satisfaction of doing my best to ensure the happiness of others. And now, my dear friend, you will oblige me by abandoning this topic for the present. It is not on the eve of your bridal day that you are to be saddened by the infectious influence of my sorrows. Besides," continued the amiable lady, smiling, "I wish to be gay—and—and—happy —— as happy as possible on this occasion! Am I not to accompany you to Fontainebleau? and shall we not some days or weeks hence have ample leisure to discuss all the circumstances which regard myself? *Then*, my dear Clarine, you shall proffer me your counsel: but for the present," added Zoe, somewhat abruptly, "let us avert our attention from the subject."

"At least there is one thing you promise me?" said Mademoiselle Volney,—"one thing upon which I must insist,—that you follow the advice which Baron Louis has given, and that you will seek the earliest opportunity of obtaining competent medical treatment? Doubtless at Fontainebleau we shall find trustworthy and talented practitioners ——"

"Yes, Clarine," answered Zoe, "I shall fulfil my duty in that respect: for you have this evening convinced me by your eloquent reasoning that the life of us mortals is not our own to be disposed of as we will; but it is a trust confided to us, to be cherished, watched over, and cared for to the utmost of our power."

Mademoiselle Volney, yielding to her friend's wishes, abandoned the topic upon which they had previously been conversing, although it was with reluctance that she did so; for she experienced the warmest affection for Lady Octavian Meredith, and she did not like the mood into which Zoe had relapsed, nor the representations she had made since that interview with the physician the result of which Clarine had hoped would have a very different effect upon her friend. And now, as she glanced furtively at Zoe's countenance, while they were bending their way back to the Chateau, she could not help thinking there was something unnatural in the serenely sad and placidly mournful air of pensive resignation which sat upon the features of Lady Octavian Meredith.

CHAPTER CXXIX.

THE FOREST.

The last beams of the setting sun, on that same September evening of which we have just been writing, were flickering in ruddy hues upon the western outskirts of one of those great forests which are still to be found in the southern parts of France. The progress of civilization creates so many new wants for mankind, that it renders it needful to redeem as much territory as possible from its wild and savage primitive condition; and thus is it that the great forests of all well-populated countries are gradually yielding to the axe; and the space which has been occupied by giant trees, whose growth indicated the lapse of centuries, has been progressively brought into cultivation that the golden harvest might wave in its luxuriance. But still, as we have just now said, there are many of these grand old forests still remaining—and some in the south of France. We do not mean woods of limited extent, nor of puny growth—nor spaces with mere patches and isolated groups of stunted trees upon them—such as in England we find dubbed by the name of "forests," and rather indicating what might have once been there than what now exists. But we are speaking of forests in the true meaning of the term,—miles and miles of uninterrupted masses of stately trees, forming in the warmer seasons of the year one vast canopy of verdure through which the sunbeams cannot penetrate.

It was upon such a forest as this that the last rays from the west were flickering in ruddy hues as a postchaise-and-four entered upon the road intersecting the vast mass of verdure. The horses had been changed at a village which stood at the entrance of the forest: the two postilions cracked their whips to inspire the fresh animals, which appeared to be of somewhat sluggish disposition: a valet in plain clothes was seated on the box; and a young man, of exceedingly handsome appearance, was the sole occupant of the interior of the chaise. Not to observe any unnecessary mystery, we may as well at once inform our reader that this was Lord Octavian Meredith, who was on his way to the Chateau where he knew that his wife resided,—that wife whom he was prepared to rejoin! With arms folded across his chest, and in a profoundly meditative mood, was Lord Octavian lying back in the vehicle. The forest was plunged in obscurity, though not so complete as to render the road difficult to be followed, or to entail the necessity of having the lamps lighted. Besides, as there are always the same postilions for the same stages, these men were perfectly conversant with the route, and could pursue it blindfold. Yet the forest was obscure, as we have said; and inside the vehicle it was quite dark. If, however, it had been possible to study Octavian's countenance under such circumstances, it would have been perceived that though exceedingly pale and bearing the traces of a strong mental conflict of very recent date, it wore an expression of firmest resolve. Yes—he had determined to rejoin Zoe: he believed that Christina loved him not—that she had trifled coquetishly with his feelings—that her heart was not so thoroughly good and ingenuous as he had originally deemed it to be; and thus every hope being destroyed in that quarter, it was with a species of desperation that he had plunged headlong as it were into the performance of the duty which he owed to his wife.

Deeper into the forest did the equipage proceed: the stage was an unusually long one for the unbroken maze of trees stretched onward for a distance of thirteen or fourteen miles; and in the interval there occurred no post-house for relays. The chaise had accomplished about half that distance — the obscurity had now deepened into almost total darkness—when on a sudden the equipage came to a stop, but with a jerking abruptness that threw Meredith forward from his seat. The next moment he heard the plunging of horses—ejaculations of terror mingled with others of threats—the trampling of feet—the sounds of blows—and then the report of fire-arms. All these alarming noises were so rapid in succession—or indeed might almost be described as so blended—that Octavian found the conflict over by the time he leaped forth from the vehicle. For a conflict it really was, though he scarcely comprehended its circumstances, and knew nothing at all of its results until a little while afterwards. And this was the reason,—that no sooner had he sprung forth, than a desperate blow was dealt him either by a bludgeon or the butt-end of a pistol; and he was stricken down senseless.

As Lord Octavian slowly came back to consciousness, he gradually grew aware that he was lying by the side of the road: and the beams of a lantern moving about, showed him the dark shape of the vehicle. He heard footsteps: they were those of a single person; and by this person the lantern was being carried. Meredith's ideas were at first in a bewildering confusion; but conspicuous amongst them was the sense of extreme danger; and he therefore lay perfectly still until he might glean something more of the circumstances which surrounded him.

A pain in his head reminded the young nobleman of how he had been stricken down; and fortunate for him was it that he had on his hat at the time—or else the blow which merely stunned would have proved fatal. All was silent, with the exception of those footsteps that accompanied the movements of the lantern. There was not so much as the impatient stamping of a horse, nor the rattling of the harness. But no wonder: for by the light of the lantern Meredith in a few minutes perceived that the horses had been detached from the chaise, and were no longer there. At the same time he observed that the lantern was borne by a female; and that as she carried it in one hand, she supported herself with a stick held in the other. He could not as yet see her face: but he beheld enough to convince him that she was a crone bowed with age.

He watched her movements, not choosing as yet to give any sign of life which might attract her attention, for fear lest she should be connected with the ruffians who had perpetrated the outrage, and that they might still be within the summoning range of her voice. Of the extent of this outrage he was as yet ignorant—although he dreaded the worst, because he beheld not his valet nor the postilions, and because he recollected the violence of the blows and the report of the fire-arms which he had heard. Raising himself very, very gently upon his elbow, he endeavoured to penetrate more scrutinisingly through the gloom which prevailed around save and except where the lantern glimmered like a will-o'-the-wisp. The crone was stooping down: something dark lay underneath the lantern—Octavian shuddered with the horrible suspicion which swept through his brain—but the next instant he shuddered more deeply and coldly still, as the rays of that lantern fell upon the white face of a human being——and he recognised his own valet!

In a moment he was upon his feet: he sprang towards the old woman, who shrieked out in affright; and clutching her violently by the arm, he exclaimed in the French tongue, "Wretch! are you plundering the dead whom your accomplices have murdered?"

"No, sir—no! heaven forbid!" responded the crone, with so sudden a regaining of her self-possession that Meredith felt convinced she was innocent of the charge he had levelled against her. "I am here to render assistance, if possible—but it is too late for the *others*—you only appear to be safe."

"Too late!" exclaimed Meredith, horrified at the idea which these words conveyed. "God forbid! Let us see."

He snatched the lantern from the woman's hand; and he now perceived that his first impression was correct, that she was a very aged crone and that the exceeding ugliness of her countenance might well under existing circumstances be taken for doubly and trebly sinister in its aspect. Lord Octavian—holding the lantern high up, so as to fling its light upon the scene—prepared himself for something dreadful: and he prepared himself not in vain. Near one of the forewheels of the chaise, lay his unfortunate valet: the mark where a pistol bullet had entered, was in the middle of the forehead; and thence the blood was trickling. A little farther on lay one of the postilions, with his skull horribly shattered, evidently by a bludgeon; and farther on still was the other postilion, lying lifeless over the trunk of a tree which had been cut down in such a manner as to fall completely across the road. The cause of the sudden stoppage of the vehicle was thus explained; and from the position in which this last-mentioned postilion was found, Meredith concluded that he must at the outset have been pitched over the horse's head by the abruptness with which the animal had come to a full stop on encountering the tree. *Then*, no doubt, the villains had set upon the unfortunate postilion, and had despatched him on the spot; for his skull was likewise battered in.

Such was the harrowing spectacle which in the ghastliness and fearfulness of its details was shadowed forth to the young nobleman by the light of the lantern. The horses, as we have already said, were gone; and on pursuing his inspection, he perceived that his own trunks and that of his unfortunate valet had been carried off. Bethinking himself of something which had not before smitten him, he felt about his person: his watch and his purse were gone—a pocket-book containing bank-notes had likewise been taken from him—the very rings from his fingers had been stripped off—he was completely despoiled, even to a gold pencil-case which he was wont to carry in his waistcoat-pocket. He now examined the person of his valet: but as he had only too well anticipated, it was similarly rifled. The entire investigation of the scene and of all these particulars, had occupied but a few minutes:—stupendously shocking as the details were, there was, alas! no difficulty in embracing them with a too frightful accuracy at a few rapid glances; and all the while Octavian so managed as not to lose sight of the crone. For if she had attempted to escape he would at once have brought her back; and he would naturally have regarded the circumstance as a proof of her guilty complicity with the perpetrators of the whole satanic outrage. But she showed no inclination to quit the spot; and now Octavian accosted her once more.

"How came you here?" he asked, narrowly watching her countenance as he held the lantern up for the purpose.

"I live in a cottage hard by," she responded; "and hearing a noise in the road, I got up, dressed myself, and came out. I thought at first it was a carriage which had upset: but on reaching the spot I found how dreadful was the work that had been done; and I was looking to see if any of the victims yet lived, when you started up and accosted me."

Her countenance changed not in a suspicious manner; and even despite her hideous ugliness, there was upon it an expression of rude rough peasant-like frankness. She was very poorly clad: indeed her appearance was indicative of the utmost poverty. Her tale seemed probable enough; and Meredith was inclined to believe it.

"This is a dreadful crime which has been perpetrated," he said; "and I am bewildered how to act. Are here no habitations nearer than the villages at the entrance and at the extremity of the forest?"

"Only a few such poor cottages as the hut that I live in," was the woman's answer. "But perhaps some of the mounted police may come this way presently——"

"Does the forest bear a bad repute?" inquired Meredith.

"People have been sometimes robbed here," answered the woman; "but they have generally been solitary travellers, either on horse or foot; and I never before knew of such a desperate performance as this. I have lived for years and years in the depth of this forest—with my poor deceased husband for a long time—and since his death by myself: but I never till now knew of blood being shed. I suppose it is some gang that has gathered in the forest: but the police will soon hunt them down after such a crime as this."

Meredith suffered the old woman to go on talking without interruption, as he wished still to study her looks as much as possible in order to ascertain what degree of confidence he might place in her. She continued to address him with the same air of rude, uncouth, but honest bluntness which he had previously remarked; and thus his impression grew stronger and stronger in her favour.

"Do you think," he asked, "that I should be likely to obtain the loan of a horse at any one of the cottages of which you speak? I would in that case ride back to the village at the entrance of the forest——"

"A horse? No, sir!" exclaimed the woman. "They are only poor people like myself, who have huts in this forest: they get their little bit of a livelihood as woodmen——"

"Then what am I to do?" demanded Meredith, with a bewildered air.

Indeed he was sorely perplexed, and had every reason to find himself so. If he left that spot to walk to either of the villages, he might fall in with the brigands, who would most probably despatch him, as they already believed they had done and had intended to do. If he remained where he was, to await the arrival of the mounted police, the murderers might come back. His predicament was bewildering to a degree: he was utterly penniless—all his jewellery was gone—his pocket-book, containing his passport and other papers, had likewise disappeared—he had not even the means of proving his identity as an English nobleman and thus obtaining a supply of money at the next village if he were to bend his way thither. According to previous inquiries which he had made, he was full fifty miles from the chateau where his wife dwelt, and which he had hoped to reach at an early hour on the following morning. He was cruelly shocked and distressed likewise at the death of his valet and of the two unfortunate postilions; and he suffered severe pain from the blow received on the head.

"After all," he thought to himself, "the best thing I can do is to remain in the forest for the night, if I can obtain an asylum where I shall be in safety; and then in the morning I might get back to the village where the last relay was obtained. The landlord of the inn at which we stopped to take refreshments, would perhaps furnish me with funds to carry me forward to my destination: or the Mayor or some other local authority would have this much confidence in me. Even if the worst should happen, I could but remain at the inn until I had time to communicate with Zoe."

Such were the thoughts that now passed through the mind of the young nobleman; and having more or less come to a decision on the point, he again turned to the old woman, to whose hand he had in the meanwhile restored the lantern.

"Those villains have robbed me of everything I possess," he said; "and I have not at this moment the means of bestowing the slightest recompense upon any person at whose hands I might receive a civility. Do you think that one of the cottagers of whom you have spoken would give me an asylum for a few hours?"

"I am sure they would!" answered the crone with her rough air of confidence. "Though we are all poor in these parts, yet we are not savages——"

"Whose is the nearest cottage?" inquired Meredith.

"Mine, for that matter," responded the old woman; "and if you like to turn in and rest yourself there, you are truly welcome. But I can offer nothing more that the humblest accomodation; and as for recompense, a civil word at parting is everything that will be required by Dame Roquette."

"You shall have the civil word, Dame Roquette," answered Meredith; "and a much more substantial reward shall follow so soon as I obtain the means of bestowing it. We will not leave the remains of these unfortunate men to become a prey to the vermin or birds of the forest. Hold you the lantern while I drag the bodies into the chaise."

This task was shortly accomplished; and Meredith then said, "Now lead the way, good dame, to your abode; and I will follow."

The woman Roquette, carrying the lantern in her hand, hobbled off from the spot, leaning upon her stick; and plunging into the deeper forest mazes which skirted the road, she proceeded for a distance of about a mile. Meredith was just wondering how the noise of the conflict in the road could possibly have reached the ears of the old woman if her dwelling-place were thus remote, when she stopped at the door of what proved to be a little hovel. It stood so completely embowered in the depth of the forest, that even in the daytime a stranger in the district would have failed to notice that there was a human habitation there until he came altogether upon it. Dame Roquette pushed open the door; and Octavian followed her into the place.

The hut was divided into two compartments—one containing a great quantity of the small brushwood which the crone had gathered in the forest, and also a number of logs rudely chopped up. The other compartment—which was the larger of the two—displayed a meagre and wretched assortment of furniture, all of the roughest materials. There was a bed in one corner; and the half-opened door of a cupboard showed a scanty supply of food of the most frugal description.

"If it weren't for the kindness of the woodmen towards a poor lone body like me," said Dame Roquette, "I dont't know what would become of me. They give me logs for firing; and when they take their own faggots to the village in the hand-cart which half-a-dozen of them have in common amongst them, they take mine likewise. The forest-keepers are also good enough in their way; and often when I come home I find a loaf and a piece of cheese, with occasionally a hare or a rabbit, upon my table."

"Good heavens! what a life for a human being to lead!" thought Meredith to himself. "How little do the dwellers amidst the luxuries of great cities and towns know of the fearful struggles which so many of their fellow-creatures have to make to keep body and soul together!"

"You can have this room, sir—and welcome," continued Dame Roquette. "I will stretch myself on a bit of straw that there is amongst the faggots and logs."

"I will not deprive you, my good woman, of your resting-place. I could not do such a thing!" answered Meredith. "I will stretch myself on the faggots there, and thanks for the accommodation. But you are sure——"

He was about to ask whether the crone was confident that the robbers were not likely to revisit her cottage: he however checked himself, as it struck him in the first place that there was something pusillanimous in the query—and in the second place that it was an useless one as she could not possibly tell what the lawless ruffians might do—unless indeed she were an accomplice of their's, which however he no longer suspected.

"Good night, dame," he said: and passing into the adjoining room, he closed the door of communication between the two compartments.

Octavian threw himself down upon the straw which lay on the ground in that place; but he had not been long there before his mind underwent a sudden and complete revulsion in respect to Dame Roquette. Something had struck him like a flash of lightning. She had told him, when they were in the road together, that on hearing certain noises she had got up, dressed herself, and issued forth. But this tale was far from being consistent with the fact that her humble pallet in the next room showed that it had not been disturbed that night: the patchwork coverlid was spread neatly and smoothly over the bedding; and the bolster, covered with the sheet of coarse unbleached linen, which may be seen in the humblest hovel in France, bore not the impression of a human head having reposed there.

The dame therefore had evidently told a falsehood—and a most unnecessary one if she were honest. Again too arose in Octavian's mind the thought that the hut was too far from the road for any sounds occurring in the one place to be heard at the other—especially by an old crone whose age forbade the belief that her sense of hearing was any of the keenest. And then too, even if she did hear the sounds, how could she possibly mistake them for the upsetting of a vehicle, when the loudest of the noises was the report of the firearms? All points considered, Meredith felt convinced that there was something wrong about the woman—perhaps even the very worst: namely, that she might be an accomplice of the brutal brigand murderers.

What course should he pursue? If he were suddenly to pounce upon her and accuse her of treachery, her cries might bring the ruffians to her succour, and to the accomplishment of his own destruction: for who could tell how close they might be in the vicinage of the hovel? But if on the other hand he were to endeavour to steal forth, she might hear him, and a similar result would ensue. Again, he thought to himself that if he lingered there the villains might come to the place—it might be their rendezvous—and they would perhaps despatch him for fear lest the information he might give should lead to their detection. All things considered, Octavian resolved to seize upon the old woman, and by threats of wreaking a prompt vengeance upon her, make her confess whatsoever he might be enabled to extort. But scarcely had he come to this determination, when his ear caught the sounds of footsteps approaching the cottage.

It will be deemed no derogation to his natural bravery if we admit that Meredith was for a moment seized with a mortal terror, as the hideous idea struck him that he was now indeed completely in the power of the murderers. But as that glacial shudder passed rapidly off, his first impulse was to seize upon a log of wood and sell his life as dearly as possible. He was enveloped in utter darkness; and scarcely had he snatched up the billet, when he heard the front door gently open. It was Dame Roquette stealing forth: the heavier footsteps outside instantaneously ceased: Octavian felt assured that she had encountered the brigands—she was telling them that he was there! The idea now struck him that he would seize the opportunity to attempt an escape by gliding forth and plunging into the mazes of the forest. He opened the door communicating with the room whence the old woman had just emerged: but the light was still burning there—he would be seen on crossing the threshold—bullets would be discharged at him—death would in that case be inevitable: he felt that he had better trust to the chapter of accidents. At the very instant that he came to this decision, he heard a man's voice say, "Well, go your ways now—and remember the business for to-morrow!"

"Yes, yes," answered three or four whispering voices: and then the sounds of retreating footsteps met Octavian's ears.

He still held the door of communication ajar; and now he heard the same voice which had just given the order to the gang to disperse, say in a low tone, "Do you really think he is asleep?"

"I believe so," replied Dame Roquette; "for he looked dreadfully tired, as well as completely overcome by the scene."

"Good!" rejoined the man. "If he sleeps there is no use in doing him a mischief, as he has nothing more to be robbed of. But we shall see."

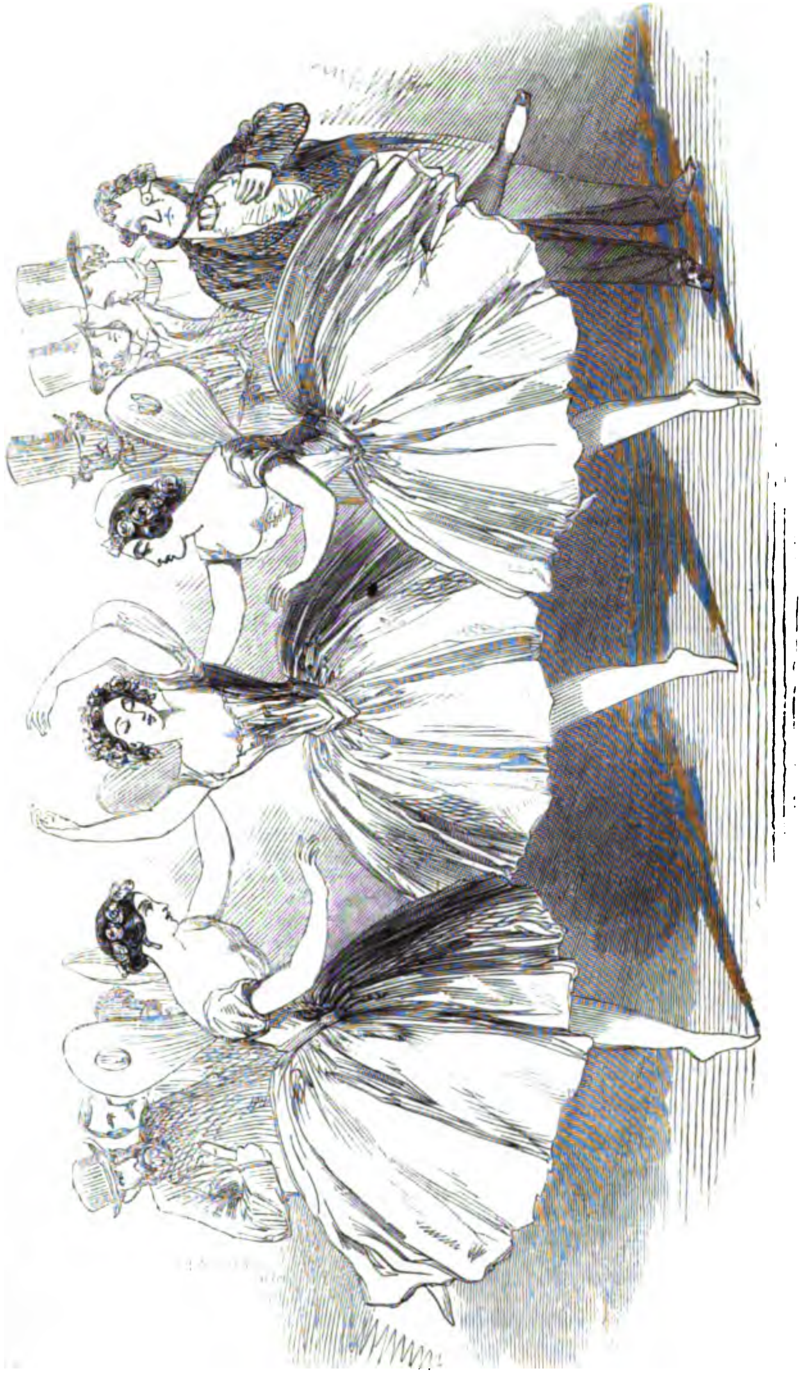
Octavian gently closed the door, and at once laid himself down on the straw; for his mind was suddenly made up what course to adopt. He perceived that there was no intention to commit an unnecessary murder; he comprehended likewise that the man who had remained behind, and who appeared to be the chief of the gang, was going to confer with Dame Roquette; and he saw that if it were possible to hear their discourse he might not only ascertain what the contemplated business was for the morrow, but likewise glean enough to enable the police authorities to make a capture of the whole gang.

CHAPTER CXXX.

OCTAVIAN AND SON.

Lord Octavian Meredith knew perfectly well that circumstances were now compelling him to play a very perilous game: but all his fortitude and self-possession were at his command, especially as he believed and hoped there was now only one male ruffian to deal with in case of emergency. He deposited himself upon the straw, assuming the attitude of one who slept; he composed his features in a suitable manner—he breathed as if he were indeed an unconscious slumberer.

He heard the old woman and her ruffian companion steal into the hut: the outer door was then



gently closed: the door of communication between the two rooms was next opened with an evident study to avoid making the slightest disturbance; and this was an additional proof to Meredith that an unnecessary crime was not contemplated. He kept his eyes closed: the footsteps of a man advanced towards him — but they were only just audible. The light was passed three or four times across his countenance: he moved not—he maintained the most perfect self-possession—his eyelids quivered not: he looked what he feigned to be—fast asleep. The ruffian retreated as noiselessly as he had entered: Meredith would not trust himself even to the slightest raising of an eyelid, for fear lest the robber should still be looking towards him; and he knew that the faintest disclosure of the eyeball would reflect the light of the lantern. The man passed out, and the door closed behind him—the whole proceeding being conducted with the extremest caution on his part.

Meredith now heard the voices of Dame Roquette and the man whispering in the adjoining room; and with the utmost caution did he move towards the door in the thin partition. There he listened. Never was breath more suspensefully held: never were ears more keenly set to catch the sounds of low speaking tongues. And as the eyes get accustomed to the darkness and gradually perceive objects through them, so do the ears get habituated as it were to the accents of the voice, however low the whispering may be: for it is thus that the human faculties at times develop their wondrous powers. So it was with Meredith now; and if he could not catch all that was being said in the adjoining room, he at least heard sufficient to make him aware of a most ramified piece of villany that was in embryo, and also sufficient to make him rejoice inwardly that he was enabled thus to listen.

Presently, when Octavian thought that the conversation betwixt the man and the woman in the adjoining room was drawing to a close, he was about to creep back to his place upon the straw,—but a question put by the male villain led him to tarry at the threshold a little longer.

"And after all, then," he said, "it was a false alarm?"

"Yes—no one passed the spot—no one came near it," replied Dame Roquette; "and there I consequently very soon was, with my lantern in my hands. I had just stripped the valet of his watch and purse when the gentleman himself came to his senses——"

"But you had previously rifled him likewise?"

"Of course!—or how could I have just now given you all the things I found about him? It was a wonder," continued Dame Roquette, "that he didn't come to his senses while I was dipping my hands into his pockets and pulling off his rings: but he did not. Ah! how he startled me for a moment when he afterwards came rushing towards me——"

"Oh, but you have got such a brazen hardihood!" rejoined her ruffian companion: "you are seldom or never taken aback!"

"Hush, hush!—not too loud!" said the dame.

"Oh, he was sleeping as soundly as possible," answered the chief of the gang: for such Meredith had discovered him actually to be. "And now I must be off—for I've got many good miles to ride before daylight. Remember all I have said!"

"Yes, yes—there's no fear," responded Dame Roquette. "Directly Moulin returns to-morrow, I will send round the word."

Meredith now considered it expedient to creep back to the straw; and this move he accomplished with a most scrupulous caution. About five minutes afterwards the brigand again entered the little room with the lantern in his hand: again did Meredith submit with admirable presence of mind to the process of having the light passed before his eyes; and the desperado retreated, with the full conviction that the young nobleman was sound asleep. He then issued from the cottage; and Octavian felt that he was now altogether safe.

He might have availed himself of the present opportunity to seize upon the old woman according to one of the ideas which had originally struck him: but he no longer thought it expedient to adopt this course. The facts he had learnt from the whispered conversation decided him upon going on altogether another tack. He therefore lay quiet: hour after hour passed—he felt not the slightest inclination to sleep—and the reader may rest assured that he did not voluntarily court the advance of slumber. The grey dawn of morning at length began to glimmer through a little square window which there was in the room where Octavian lay; and he now resolved to depart. He knocked at the partition-door: Dame Roquette, who was already up and dressed, bade him enter the room—and he did so. He assumed the most courteous demeanour—thanked her for her hospitality—and promised to take the earliest opportunity of rewarding her. She had already begun to prepare breakfast; and she invited him to remain to partake of it: but he declined, pleading his anxiety to get to the nearest village and continue his journey.

Bidding Dame Roquette farewell, Lord Octavian Meredith issued from the cottage, and made the best of his way through that part of the forest which led towards the road where the foul crime of the preceding night had been perpetrated. On reaching the spot he found half-a-dozen of the mounted police there: they had only just discovered the chaise and the hideous tragedy which its ghastly contents revealed. Meredith was at once enabled to give those fearful explanations which are already known to the reader; and the officer who was in command of the party requested the young nobleman to accompany them to the village at the commencement of the forest. A couple of the *gendarmes'* horses were attached to the chaise; and towards the village did the procession repair. It will be seen that Dame Roquette was still suffered to continue at large, although Octavian communicated to the officers all that he knew concerning her complicity with the organized gang. The reason that she was not at once arrested will presently transpire.

On the village being reached, immense was the sensation produced amongst its inhabitants by the tidings of the hideous tragedy in the forest, and by the spectacle of the corpses as they were borne forth from the chaise. Lord Octavian and the officer of the mounted police lost no time in holding a conference with the Mayor: but this was of the most private character, and nothing of its nature transpired. Immediately it broke up Lord Octavian resumed his journey in another equipage, he having received a loan from the Mayor to meet his immediate pecuniary requirements.

It was a little past ten o'clock in the morning when the young English nobleman thus pursued his journey,—now unattended, and having to deplore the loss of a valet who had served him faithfully. The forest was traversed—the fatal spot where the hideous tragedy had taken place, was passed; and when once the maze of countless trees was left behind, the road lay through an open country over which the eye could range to a considerable distance on either side. Upwards of thirty miles were so accomplished; and it was between one and two o'clock in the afternoon when the post-chaise entered a town where Octavian purposed to tarry a brief space that he might procure the refreshment of which he stood so much in need; for he had not as yet broken his fast.

The equipage drove up to the door of the principal hotel in the place; and on alighting, Lord Octavian observed two handsome travelling carriages which had evidently only arrived a few minutes previous, as the post-horses which were now to be changed, had not as yet moved away from the vicinage of the hotel. A couple of domestics in handsome liveries were conversing with a third menial in plain clothes, and who was evidently a valet in the same service as the footmen themselves. Octavian therefore concluded that some family of distinction had halted at this same hotel where his own equipage had stopped: but his mind was too much engrossed with a variety of subjects to have scope for any curiosity on that particular point. Inquiring for a private room, his demand was attended to by a waiter of the establishment,—who requested him to ascend to the first floor. Octavian followed the domestic up the staircase; and at the moment they reached the landing, the door of an apartment suddenly opened and a lady came forth. Ejaculations burst from the lips of this lady, as well as from those of Octavian: for it was the wife who was thus unexpectedly met by the husband at that place.

Zoe's first impulse was to spring forward and throw herself into Octavian's arms: but all in a moment a sickening sensation came over her as she remembered that he loved another! She staggered against the door-post, and would have fallen, were it not that Lord Octavian himself rushed towards her and caught her in his arms.

"Zoe—my dearest wife!" he murmured, as he strained her to his breast. "I was coming to seek you—I was on my way to join you, to do my duty by you henceforth! But by what lucky chance is it that I meet you here?"

"Octavian, is it possible," said Zoe, in accents tremulous with mingled joy and wonderment, "that I have heard aright—or do my ears deceive me?"

"It is true, Zoe," responded Meredith: "but, Oh! I have so much to tell you!"—then suddenly recollecting that the hotel-servant was a spectator of this scene, he turned to him, saying, "Conduct us to the private room that I have asked for."

The waiter at once obeyed: Zoe and Octavian were now alone together.

"Can you forgive me, Zoe?" asked her husband, seating himself by her side, taking her hand, and gazing upon her with looks of earnest entreaty: "is it possible that you can forgive me—that you can receive me again as I wish to be received?—for I am aware, Zoe, that you know everything——Alas, I have long been convinced of it!"

For some minutes the amiable young lady was so overpowered by her feelings that she could give no response: the tears trickled down her cheeks—but through them she gazed with the most earnest and devoted affection upon her husband. Again and again did he press her to his heart: but his own voice was now stifled by the emotions which agitated within him.

"Zoe," he at length said, sinking at her feet, "on my knees do I implore your pardon for the past! I have indulged in a dream—I was its victim—it was a delusion——yet while it lasted it had the power to render me faithless in thought and in feeling unto yourself. Oh! bitterly, bitterly do I repent everything that has occurred! I have been very, very wicked—I have requited all your love in a manner which I blush to look back upon! But forgive me, Zoe—forgive me!—and henceforth shall it be my constant and unwearied study to make every atonement!"

"Octavian," answered Zoe, in a voice which flowed as softly as the tears themselves that were trickling from her eyes, "I never had expected to hear such language as this from your lips! And, Oh! if it be sincerely spoken—if it do indeed faithfully represent any change which may have taken place in your own heart, you are at this moment rendering me the happiest of women!"

"As God is my judge," exclaimed Meredith, starting up from his knees, "I am proclaiming from the lips all that is truly felt in the heart!"

Again they embraced; and words have no power to describe the joy, the paradise of feeling which Zoe now experienced. Indeed, it was a happiness almost too much for her to endure; and this sudden change in her circumstances was naturally accompanied by a proportionate revulsion in all the feelings of the heart itself. Without as yet being acquainted with a single particular of the incidents which had brought this change about and recalled her husband to her arms, she accepted the assurances which Octavian had given her: she felt convinced they were sincere—his presence there was a proof of it—and she consequently abandoned herself to the full tide of that sunlit stream of joy on which her soul was now floating. A dizziness came over her, and she felt as if she were about to faint—as if indeed she must swoon off in the very ecstasy of happiness itself: but she exerted all her powers to save herself as it were from unconsciousness—and she succeeded.

"Oh, my beloved Octavian!" she murmured, as her head reposed upon his shoulder—and though her voice was low, yet was there a thrill of exultation in its tone, "what bliss has this day brought forth for me! And yesterday too——I ought to have looked upon it as the harbinger of some most happy change that was to take place——"

"Yesterday, my beloved Zoe?" said Octavian: "what mean you?"

"Until yesterday," rejoined the now happy wife, "methought that there were within me the seeds of an incurable disease: methought that consumption had fastened upon my vitals, and that I had not long to remain in this world! Indeed, Octavian, for your sake I wished that death would come speedily—and I cared not *how* speedily! But yesterday the skill of a physician enabled him to ascertain that all my forebodings were erroneous."

"Heaven be thanked!" cried Meredith: and it was indeed with sincerity that he gave vent to this ejaculation. "Yes, heaven be thanked!—for, Oh, my beloved Zoe! it is happiness to know that you will live long in order that the atonement of your contrite husband may be all the more complete. Ah! think you that I have not comprehended all the sacrifices which you in your sublime magnanimity were making on my behalf? Yes—I have been a wretch towards you——"

"Speak not thus, my dearest, dearest husband," interrupted Lady Octavian: "there was nothing that I would not have done to ensure your happiness!—there was no sacrifice of my own feeling that I would not have made in order to save you from being unhappy! But tell me, Octavian——"

"Yes, I will tell you everything," exclaimed the young nobleman. "Yet in so doing I must mention a name——"

"I know it," said his wife firmly,—"the name of Christina Ashton. But heaven forbid, Octavian, that you should have to tell me aught which may henceforth prevent me from regarding her as my friend——"

"Zoe," responded the young nobleman, "if she were not virtuous I should not dare to look you in the face——I should not be worthy of this pardon which you have bestowed upon me! Christina loves another——"

"She loves another?" cried Zoe, with a thrill of joy in her soul. "Is it possible that I have all along been mistaken as to the nature of her feelings towards you——"

"Suffice it to say, Zoe," interrupted Meredith, "she loves another! Of this I have received the most incontestable proof. It aroused me from my delusion—it awoke me with a sudden start from my dream——I beheld all the enormity of my conduct towards yourself—I set off to join you in France—I lost not an instant—I was resolved to throw myself at your feet and implore your pardon for the past! For, Oh! I knew that you loved me, Zoe—and I despaired not of obtaining that pardon!"

"Oh, it is granted—it is granted!" exclaimed the happy wife: "and henceforth, Octavian, you need never entertain a remorseful thought nor cherish a mournful memory on account of the incidents which are gone by!"

"Admirable Zoe!" exclaimed Meredith; "how could I ever have been vile and base enough to do violence to a heart so loving and tender as your's? But I repeat, the remainder of my life shall be devoted to the duty of insuring your happiness;—and, Oh! that duty will be a pleasant one! But tell me, Zoe—how is it that you are here? Has the bridal already taken place? and are you accompanying the bridal party?"

"Yes—it is so," responded Zoe: and then, with a look of surprise, she asked, "But how did you learn that the marriage was fixed for to-day?—because you must have left London before my last letter, which was only written a few days ago, could possibly have reached you."

"True, Zoe," answered Octavian: "but it was from another source that I accidentally heard of the bridal that was fixed for to-day. And now that I find you here, and recollect having seen the travelling-carriages in front of the hotel——"

"Your conjectures are right," said Lady Octavian; "I am accompanying the bridal party. This morning my beloved friend Clarine has become the bride of Viscount Delorme."

"And who accompanies the happy pair in addition to yourself?" asked Meredith.

"The first carriage is occupied by that happy pair and myself," responded Zoe. "The other carriage is for the accommodation of the notary who drew up the marriage-contracts according to the French form, and who with his wife came all the way from Fontainebleau to be present at the ceremony; for they have known the Viscount Delorme for some years and are much attached to him. And in that same second carriage a friend of Alfred Delorme's travels with the notary and his wife. He is the Baron de Margaux: he was invited to attend the bridal—and he came, though he arrived late. The bridesmaids were the daughters of a gentleman dwelling in the neighbourhood of the old Chateau; and it was the worthy priest of the village who procured their assistance on the occasion. They of course returned to their home after the ceremony. As for M. Volney, the bride's father,—he remains at the Chateau for the present——But you seem to be musing, my dear husband?"

"I was thinking how my presence might interfere with the arrangements you had previously made. From your letters I have been enabled to judge how great is the friendship which has sprung up between the Viscountess Delorme and yourself: you have doubtless promised to remain with her for the present—she will be disappointed if you be separated from her——"

"And why should I be separated?" asked Zoe. "Oh, *you*, my dear Octavian, will be truly welcome amongst this bridal party; and you know not how rejoiced will the amiable Clarine prove at our reunion. You will not be angry with me, Octavian, if I confess that I made her my confidante——"

"I can be angry with you for nothing! But think you that I dare intrude myself——"

"It will be no intrusion," exclaimed Zoe; "and well convinced am I that the Viscount Delorme will most cheerfully invite you to be of the party and offer you a seat in one of the carriages. Come at once!—for our halt was not to be long here——we were told that it might be half-an-hour, in consequence of some little delay with regard to the post-horses——"

"One word more, Zoe!" said Octavian. "A terrible crime was perpetrated last night—a crime of which I was nearly being rendered the victim——"

"Good heavens, is it possible?"—and Zoe clung to her husband as if she feared that it was possible for him even now to be snatched from her.

He related the particulars of the tragedy in all their details; and his wife listened with shuddering horror. For some minutes more they remained alone together in that room, in deep and earnest conversation; and then they repaired to the apartment where the bridal pair and their friends were gathered.

Lord Octavian Meredith was now presented to the Viscount and Viscountess Delorme; and from both did he receive a cordial welcome. The Viscount then proceeded to introduce him to the other persons present; and Clarine availed herself of this opportunity to draw Zoe aside and to offer her felicitations that her husband was restored to her.

Meanwhile the other introductions to which we have just alluded took place. First of all Octavian was presented to the notary and his wife, who were a middle-aged couple, of very excellent dispositions and very pleasing manners.

"And now, my lord," said the Viscount Delorme, thus addressing Octavian, "permit me to present you to my friend the Baron De Margaux—a gentleman whom I have for some time known, and from whom I have on various occasions received great kindnesses."

The introduction was effected; and we may here observe that the Baron De Margaux was about forty years of age—of tall figure—and if not exactly handsome, at least very prepossessing in his looks. He was elegantly dressed: he had dark hair; and a glossy moustache gave him a certain military appearance. He was considered to be exceedingly fascinating in his manners,—one of those men who have the power of rendering themselves agreeable without any visible effort, or without any study after effect. He immediately began conversing in an affable strain with Lord Octavian Meredith, until the Viscount Delorme's valet entered to announce that the equipages were now in readiness.

The Viscount at once gave Lord Octavian a pressing invitation to accompany the party to Fontainebleau and make his mansion a home so long as he might find it agreeable. The offer was accompanied by the intimation that a seat in one of the carriages was also at Octavian's service; and the young nobleman accepted all these proposals with grateful acknowledgments.

"I must however observe," said Meredith, "that I join your party under circumstances alike peculiar and painful. I have neither valet in attendance upon me, nor a change of garments; and the very money which I now have in my purse is a loan which I procured. Last night a horrible crime was perpetrated in a forest some thirty miles distant: murder's dreadful work was done—my faithful domestic and the two postilions of the vehicle in which I journeyed, fell by the hands of brigands!"

Ejaculations of horror burst from several lips as this intelligence was imparted by Lord Octavian.

"I myself was stricken down senseless," continued the young nobleman; "and I was indebted to a poor old peasant-woman living in the forest for an asylum for the night. At an early hour this morning I bent my way to the village that was nearest to the scene of the tragedy; and on representing my position to a person in that place, I procured the money for a draft upon my London banker."

"And is there no clue to the miscreants who perpetrated this crime?" asked Alfred Delorme, his countenance expressing mingled horror and indignation.

"You may conjecture," responded Octavian, "how little was the trace which the villains left behind them, when they assassinated my valet and the two postilions, and left me for dead upon the spot."

"And that is the very forest," observed the Viscount Delorme, "which we shall have to traverse presently."

"It will be in the broad daylight," observed Lord Octavian: "and consequently there is nothing to fear. Besides, our party is too numerous——and moreover the villains would scarcely venture upon an attempt at another crime so close on the heels of the former. I did not mention those dreadful circumstances with the idea of making you alter your previously arranged plans——"

"A portion of these plans," interjected the Viscount Delorme, "was to the effect that we should halt for the night at a town about ten miles beyond the forest."

"And by all means keep to your arrangements," said Lord Octavian. "It were downright pusillanimity on my part to counsel you otherwise; and it were unnecessary for you to think of a change in your projects."

"Most unquestionably," said the Baron De Margaux; "for if I understood you aright, my dear friend, the people of the hotel at the town where you have all along purposed to stop, have received their instructions to prepare for the reception of this large party which we now form."

Finally, after a little more discussion, it was agreed that the journey should be continued, and the plan should remain precisely the same as if Lord Octavian Meredith's fearful intelligence had not been communicated at all.

CHAPTER CXXXI.

THE BARON DE MARGAUX.

It was three o'clock when the equipages started in continuation of the journey. The first carriage contained the Viscount and Viscountess Delorme, Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith: the second contained the Baron De Margaux, the notary and his wife. The three male domestics and three lady's-maids (two belonging to Zoe, and one to the Viscountess) were distributed on the dickies of the two vehicles. We should observe, in order to avoid leaving anything unaccounted for, that immediately after the Viscount Delorme had received the assent of M. Volney to his marriage with Clarine, he had sent for these equipages from Fontainebleau to that village which was in the neighbourhood of the old Chateau.

It was about six o'clock when the carriages halted at a village at the extremity of the forest in which the dreadful tragedy of the previous night had been enacted. On driving up to the post-house, the travellers were informed that they must wait about half-an-hour for horses, there having been an unusual number of equipages passing along that road for the last day or two; and as the whole posting arrangements are a monopoly in the hands of the French Government, it is forbidden for any private enterprise to interfere therewith: so that it is by no means a rare occurrence for travellers to be thus temporarily inconvenienced, as was the case with those of whom we are now writing.

The consequence of the delay was that the party had to proceed to the village inn, which was totally distinct from the post-house. As a matter of course some refreshments were ordered: but the Viscount Delorme expressed his annoyance at the delay, as he naturally wished to get to the end of the day's journey for the sake of the ladies, who he was afraid would be frightened to pass through the forest as evening approached, after the dreadful tale told by Lord Octavian Meredith.

"I will go and see how long these horses are likely to be," said the Baron De Margaux.

"And I also will endeavour to urge them on at the post-house," said Lord Octavian Meredith.

"I beg," observed the Baron, "that your lordship will not give yourself the trouble: the remonstrance of one will be sufficient."

"On the contrary," exclaimed Meredith, "if they see that we are impatient they may perhaps hasten their arrangements to serve us; for these delays are truly scandalous, when we consider that the laws do not admit the alternative of obtaining relays elsewhere."

"And yet methinks," urged the Baron, "that if I were to act alone in the matter, I might with more effect use that persuasiveness which is of a golden character:"—and he smiled significantly as he tapped the pocket which might be supposed to contain the purse.

"By all means do as you think fit," said Octavian, with a ccurteous bow, which was as much as to imply that he renounced his intention of accompanying the Baron.

"Yes—I think," said the notary, "that the Baron can manage the matter very well by himself—the more especially as you, my lord, are a foreigner, to whom the postmaster might not be inclined to show any extraordinary attention."

"Rest assured that I will do my best," said the Baron De Margaux: and he issued from the room.

Immediately after the door had closed behind him, Octavian said to Zoe, in a hurried whisper, "Engage them in conversation for a few minutes, so that they may not think my absence strange, nor immediately remark it."

Lady Octavian did as she was desired; and her husband stole forth from the apartment.

"Your friend the Baron," said Zoe to the Viscount Delorme, "appears to be even more impatient of this delay than you yourself are. He trusts to his powers of persuasion to abridge it as much as possible——"

"Yes, he is a man who is not to be imposed upon by these public functionaries," answered the Viscount.

"You have known the Baron a long time?" said Zoe inquiringly.

"I first met him in Madrid about three years ago," answered the Viscount. "He was then engaged to be married to a young lady of great wealth and beauty, the daughter of an old Hidalgo. I know not how it happened—but the match was suddenly broken off: a great mystery pervaded the circumstance—and the Baron himself observed the trictest silence upon the point. It was however upposed by his friends that he had discovered omething prejudicial to the lady's character, and that he himself was the author of the rupture. While at Madrid, he rendered me an essential service: for one night, when returning late from a party at the residence of some French friends in that city, I was attacked by three or four ruffians, who struck me down senseless. When I returned to consciousness, the Baron was bending over me: he had saved my life from those miscreants: but unfortunately he had not come up in time to prevent them from making off with my pocket-book, which was full of bank-notes. It appears they were about to despatch me at the instant the Baron so fortunately made his appearance."

"That is a service," said the notary, "which you can never forget."

"Assuredly not," answered the Viscount Delorme. "We afterwards met in Barcelona: for I have travelled much in Spain, and have visited all the principal cities and towns. I resided for some months in the Catalonian capital; and the Baron was there during the whole time. We dwelt at the same hotel—and we were both alike sufferers from a piece of villany that was perpetrated in the establishment."

"And what was that?" asked the notary.

"There was some grand ecclesiastical procession one day," continued the Viscount, "which absorbed universal attention. The hotel where we resided was deserted by its inmates, who were anxious to behold the ceremony. When I returned, I found that my trunks had been rifled of all their valuables; and a considerable number of bank-notes had been taken from one of them. But my loss was comparatively trivial when I came to learn that of the Baron De Margaux. His trunks had likewise been pillaged, and he lost a sum three or four times greater than that of which I was plundered. Two or three other guests in the same establishment were similarly served; and it was therefore evident that the thieves had made the best of their time during the procession."

"And were they never detected?" asked the notary's wife.

"Never," replied the Viscount. "On several subsequent occasions I have met the Baron De Margaux; but there is one to which I must especially direct your attention, as we are conversing on the subject. The scene was at Naples; and one day I was invited by a foreign friend whom I met in that city, to accompany him to the rehearsal at the grand theatre La Scala. Thither we accordingly repaired; and there I again met my friend the Baron De Margaux. Having listened to the singing, we remained to witness the ballet; and as it was a new one, the director of the theatre had according to custom ordered the dancers to appear in precisely the same costume which they were to wear in the evening at the public performance. Amongst these dancers was one of great eminence: she came in her carriage—she was attended by a couple of lady's-maids; and whether it were out of vanity, or whether it were for the purpose of consulting the ballet-master as to the effects which would be produced by bedizening herself with gems, I know not: all I can say is that this celebrated *danseuse* brought with her on the occasion a casket of the most magnificent diamonds. She did not however put them on for the rehearsal; and they were left in her dressing-room in the care of her principal lady's-maid.

This *danseuse* and two others were in the midst of an elegant *pas de trois*, when all of a sudden there was a cry of 'Fire!' from the back part of the stage. Only imagine the confusion and terror which immediately ensued amongst the whole company of singers and dancers assembled for the occasion, as well as amongst the other theatrical officials and the number of spectators whom the courtesy of the director had admitted! It was but too true that through the negligence of a carpenter or a scene-shifter the place was on fire. I remember that some of the young females were so paralysed by consternation as to be utterly unable to help themselves:—their brains appeared to be turned! All the gentlemen present rendered their services with promptitude and presence of mind: but it was to the daring conduct of the Baron De Margaux that the flames were extinguished and the whole theatre was saved from conflagration. The event had however an unfortunate sequence; for the diamonds of the celebrated *danseuse* to whom I have been alluding, were nowhere to be found when order was again restored. The *danseuse* was a prey to the most distracting grief; and she levelled the bitterest reproaches against her tire-women. There was however much excuse for those poor creatures; for it was in the immediate vicinage of the dressing-rooms that the fire had caught; and therefore the instant the alarm was given, they had rushed forth in wildest terror, thinking only of saving their lives and utterly regardless of the casket of jewels."

"And were they never discovered?" asked the notary's wife.

"I am convinced they were not!" murmured Zoe, thus involuntarily giving an audible expression to the idea which was passing in her mind.

The words were not however precisely caught by any one present; and the Viscountess Delorme inquired, "What were you saying, my dear friend?"

"Nothing," responded Lady Octavian Meredith. "I meant nothing particular:"—but she had an abstracted air as she thus spoke.

"I cannot precisely say," continued the Viscount Delorme, "that the real author of the robbery was not discovered; though I may positively affirm that the jewels themselves were not. One of the scene-shifters was proved to have rushed out of the theatre in a very suspicious manner the moment the cry of fire was raised: he was arrested—and though I have forgotten the particulars, yet I know that the circumstantial evidence was deemed sufficiently strong against him to induce the criminal tribunal to declare him guilty; and he was sentenced to some very severe punishment."

"And the poor *danseuse* lost her diamonds?" said the notary, in a tone of sympathy.

"Yes: and they were of exceeding value," rejoined the Viscount Delorme. "But, speaking of the Baron De Margaux, it is my duty as well as my pleasure to observe that whenever we have met he has invariably demonstrated the utmost friendship towards me. A few days ago I accidentally encountered him in the neighbourhood of the old Chateau: he was passing through the village at the time—and he halted there for refreshments while the two horses were being changed. Glad to meet so excellent a friend, who had saved my life at Madrid, I asked him to be present at that happy ceremony of this morning which gave me the hand of my beloved Clarine."

"And every friend of your's, dearest Alfred," whispered the young lady, "shall ever be esteemed as a friend by me. The moment you first informed me how deeply you were indebted to the Baron De Margaux, I was rejoiced to learn that he was to be present at the ceremony of this day."

Leaving the conversation to progress in this manner at the hotel, we must follow Lord Octavian Meredith, who had issued from the room almost immediately after the Baron De Margaux quitted it. Hastily descending the stairs, the young nobleman found one of the Viscount Delorme's footmen lounging at the front door; and he inquired which direction the Baron had taken. The footman replied that the Baron had sped through the village in the direction of the post-house. Thither Octavian therefore proceeded; and on coming within sight of the post-house, he observed the Baron talking to the postmaster himself. Standing aside in the shade of some trees, so as to avoid being seen, Octavian kept his eyes upon the Baron, and presently observed him saunter away from the spot where he had just been standing. Instead of returning into the village, he passed out of it; and when at a distance of about two hundred yards from the posting-house, he stopped and looked around.

Meredith still managed to keep out of sight, though retaining the Baron constantly in view. The Baron went on a little farther—probably to the distance of about another hundred yards; and then he whistled. The road on both sides was bordered by trees; for the village was on the outskirt of the forest. Meredith concealed himself amongst the trees on one side of the road; and in a few minutes he beheld an individual issue from amongst the trees on the other side and join the Baron. Peeping cautiously along, Octavian got near enough to listen to their conversation—a proceeding which the thick fringe of hedge bordering the road in that particular spot, allowed him thus to accomplish. It is not now necessary to explain why he thus listened, or what he overheard, as these details will presently transpire in their proper place. Suffice it for the present to say that the conversation was not very long, and that so soon as it was over the Baron speeding away, re-entered the village.

The man with whom he had been discoursing, walked on a little distance in a contrary direction, and therefore away from the village: but all of a sudden, at the point where the hedge ceased, he plunged in amongst the trees on the same side as that where Meredith had remained concealed. Of all these movements Octavian was aware; and gliding amongst the trees, he in a few minutes confronted the individual to whom we are alluding. He was a short, stout man, attired in a peasant garb: there was nothing sinister in his appearance:—on the contrary, he might be taken for a quiet and inoffensive rustic. He started on thus suddenly meeting with some one in that maze of shade: but almost at the same instant Octavian sprang at him and hurled him to the ground. The fellow struggled desperately, and even succeeded in getting a clasp-knife from his pocket. But before he had time to open it, Meredith had wrested it from his clutch, and had hurled it to a distance. Almost immediately afterwards the sounds of footsteps were heard approaching: the ruffian made one last and desperate effort to free himself; and he would possibly have succeeded were it not that two of the forest police rushed up to the spot.

The fellow was taken prisoner; and Meredith hastily made certain communications to the police-officers. He then left them to bear away their captive, while he retraced his steps to the inn. While proceeding thither he adjusted his garments which had been disordered by the struggle; and with his kerchief he wiped off, as well as he was able, the dirt-stains which his clothes had caught during the conflict.

On reaching the inn, the young nobleman ascended to the apartment where he had left the bridal pair, Zoe, the notary and his wife—and where he now likewise found the Baron. This individual immediately accosted him, and said, "So your lordship thought it worth while, after all, to go and use your influence with the postmaster——At least I presume that this has been the object for which you have issued forth?"

"I have not spoken to the postmaster," replied Lord Octavian. "But may I ask you what satisfaction you have obtained from him?"

"The horses will be in readiness almost directly," answered the Baron, for a moment eyeing Meredith in a peculiar manner—and then immediately caressing his moustache with a sort of careless indifference.

"What is the matter with you, my dear Zoe?" asked Clarine, now advancing towards her friend, drawing her aside, and thus speaking to her in a whisper. "You look pale, troubled, and excited. You appear as if you were endeavouring to conceal something that is vexing you? I had hoped that with your husband restored to you—and after the assurances which you have found an opportunity of giving me, to the effect that you are now completely happy——"

"Dearest Clarine," interrupted Zoe, also speaking in a whisper, "It is not for this that I am troubled. On the contrary, I have every reason to be happy! But I see that the moment is come when, according to a hint which I have received from Lord Octavian, I am to prepare you for something. Start not, my dear Clarine—"

"Good heavens, what mean you?" ejaculated the Viscountess; and as she was thrown off her guard, or rather, we should say, alarmed by Lady Octavian's words, she spoke more loudly than she had intended.

The Viscount Delorme immediately turned towards her; and he at once perceived that terror was depicted on his bride's countenance, as well as a painful anxiety on the features of Zoe.

"Has anything occurred?" asked the Viscount, with a tone and look that were full of a tender concern. "Ah! I comprehend it! You both tremble at the idea of passing through that forest——"

"And natural enough," interrupted Lord Octavian. "Do you not think, Baron, it is natural enough that these ladies should be affrighted at the idea of venturing amidst the mazes of that forest which is now rendered so hideously memorable by the tragedy of last night."

"Indeed, my lord," answered the Baron, darting a quick but scarcely perceptible glance at Octavian's countenance, "I do not see any reason for this alarm: and methought that you yourself just now, when you first joined our party——"

"All things considered," chimed in the notary, "it would be advisable to procure an escort. We all know—and therefore it is no secret, unless, indeed, Lord Octavian Meredith be the only one ignorant of the fact—that M. Volney insisted upon giving his beloved daughter a munificent dower, all of which is in bank-notes and specie——"

"You speak as if every one knew it," interrupted the notary's wife. "Why, my dear, here is the Baron de Margaux who may perhaps be ignorant of the fact, inasmuch as he only reached the Chateau at an early hour this morning, and the marriage settlements were signed last evening."

"My friend the Baron is not ignorant upon the point," said the Viscount Delorme; "for having no secrets from one with whom I have been so intimate, and to whom I am indebted for my very life, I failed not to mention M. Volney's intended munificence when I met the Baron some few days back in the village, and when I pressed him to be of the bridal party to-day."

"Well, really," said the notary, with impatience, "it matters not amongst us all here who knows or who does not know the fact to which I refer. It is sufficient that there is this large sum in the first carriage to render it expedient that we should have an escort. The half-hour that we were to tarry here, has already grown into an hour—the shades of evening are coming on——"

The notary's speech was suddenly interrupted by an incident which produced a startling effect. The Baron de Margaux was about to issue from the room,—when Lord Octavian Meredith bounded towards him; and clutching him forcibly by the arm, exclaimed, "No!—you cannot be permitted to depart hence!"

For an instant the countenance of the Baron displayed a ghastly expression; and he staggered as if smitten a violent blow with an invisible hand: but the next instant the blood rushed to his face; and assuming the haughtiest demeanour, he said, "My lord, this conduct so unwarrantable—so outrageous——"

"We shall see whether I am not justified in what I am doing!" said Octavian, in whom a remarkable change had taken place: for while he retained his hold upon the Baron, his looks expressed loathing and horror, mingled with the sternest resolve.

"My lord, what means this?" asked the Viscount Delorme, stepping forward.

"Clarine, my dearest friend," Zoe hastily whispered to the Viscountess, "prepare yourself for a horrible revelation——"

"Unhand me, my lord!" thundered forth the Baron De Margaux, with a perfect ferocity in his look, as he thus addressed himself to Lord Octavian.

But scarcely were the words spoken, when hasty and heavy footsteps were heard rushing up the staircase—the door was flung open—three or four police-officers burst into the room—and the Baron De Margaux was seized upon as their prisoner.

"Away with him from our sight!" exclaimed Lord Octavian Meredith: "away with that foul murderer!"

"Murderer!" echoed the Viscount Delorme. "Impossible! What madness is this?—what terrible mistake has been committed? Stop!"—and the young nobleman, violently excited, rushed forward to detain the *gendarmes* as they were moving away with their prisoner.

"Viscount!" exclaimed Meredith, "your generous confidence has been villanously betrayed. You know not the plot from which you have escaped. Look at that miscreant!—his whole demeanour bears evidence to his guilt! Away with him!"

The police-officers hurried the false Baron—now utterly discomfited, and quivering with terror—from the apartment: but the utmost excitement prevailed amongst those who were left behind in that room.

Clarine had sunk down with a subdued shriek of horror upon the sofa, when the lips of Octavian proclaimed De Margaux to be a murderer: but Zoe was at hand to sustain and minister to her friend. The notary's wife, with a groan expressive of the fearful sensation produced upon herself, clung to her husband; and he stared in horrified consternation upon the false Baron as he was being hurried out of the apartment. Octavian caught the Viscount Delorme by the arm, and hurriedly gave him a few words of explanation, to which that young nobleman listened with feelings that can be better imagined than described. Immense was the sensation which prevailed throughout the inn, and which speedily spread through the village, when it was known that the leader of the gang which had perpetrated the diabolic crime of the preceding evening had been discovered and taken into custody.

When some degree of calmness was restored in the room where the arrest was accomplished, Lord Octavian Meredith proceeded to give certain explanations. He stated how his suspicions had been excited at Dame Roquette's hut, and how he was on the point of making an endeavour to steal forth thence when his purpose was frustrated by the arrival of the band in the vicinage of the little dwelling. He then went on to explain how the chief of the gang, having dismissed the rest, entered the hut, and passing the light before his eyes, had been beguiled into the belief that he was asleep.

"But instead of sleeping," continued Lord Octavian, "I listened to the discourse which ensued between the chief of the gang and Dame Roquette. I could not succeed in overhearing all that was said: but in the first instance I was surprised to find that the leader of that gang of miscreants was speaking in language the most grammatically accurate, and in a tone which appeared to denote the polished gentleman, instead of the low brutal ruffian. Having made some comments upon the awful work which had just been accomplished, the leader went on to explain to Dame Roquette the business which he had in hand for the morrow—namely, for this day. There was talk of an ambush to be laid and the mustering of the gang at some given point in the forest, in order that a grand blow might be struck boldly and successfully: for the chief expressed his conviction that there would be more than one equipage, and therefore many people to deal with. Then for some minutes he spoke in a lower tone so that I could not catch what he said: but presently, to my surprise and consternation, I heard him mention the names of M. Volney and his daughter. Ah! you may suppose that I was indeed startled on hearing those names: for I knew them to be those of the kind friends beneath whose roof my own wife was sojourning."

"The miscreant!" exclaimed the Viscount Delorme. "And to think that I should have for some years considered that man to be amongst my best friends! But proceed, my lord:—we are impatient for your explanations."

"After that low whispering," continued Octavian, "the leader of the murderous gang went on speaking to Dame Roquette in a somewhat more audible tone; and then *your* name, Viscount, was mentioned. I gathered that you were the accepted suitor of M. Volney's daughter—that the bridal was to take place to-day—that after the ceremony you were to set out on your way towards Fontainebleau—and that you would pass through this forest. I likewise learnt that by some means or another the miscreant chief had ascertained that you would most probably have a very large sum of money in your possession, and that the wedding-presents of the bride were to be of a most costly description. Then the leader's voice again grew indistinct; and all I could succeed in ascertaining of this portion of his discourse, was that he himself would be upon the road—but whether in your company or not, I could not rightly understand. He however gave Dame Roquette instructions relative to the part which she would have to perform. One of his gang—a man bearing the name of Moulin—was to be likewise upon the road, and even I believe to penetrate into the neighbourhood of the Chateau itself—at all events to find an opportunity to hold communication with his chief and receive the orders which circumstances might render necessary. It is evident that the villanous leader was at that time only partially acquainted with your plans; and he knew not precisely when you would pass through the forest. For precaution's sake he did not desire his gang to muster too soon; and therefore the object of this Moulin's meeting him along the line of route, was to receive the instructions as to the hour of assemblage. It was then to be Dame Roquette's duty to carry round the final order to the separate abodes of the individuals of the band; and thus, you perceive, no precaution was omitted by the fiendlike author of the plot in order to ensure its fullest success. But I must observe that throughout this discourse which took place between himself and Dame Roquette, I did not once hear her address him by any name; nor was there a cranny in the door through which I might peep to obtain a glimpse of his countenance. Twice did he come into the little room which had been allotted to me: twice did he pass the lantern before my eyes to assure himself that I slept: but on neither occasion dared I raise my eyelids even so much as a hair's breadth, for fear the miscreant should perceive that I really slept not; and as I knew that he was armed to the teeth, while I was altogether weaponless, I was completely at his mercy. Thus you will understand that the chief went forth from the cottage without my having succeeded in obtaining the slightest idea of his personal appearance."

"It was a night of horror which you passed!"

exclaimed the Viscount Delorme: and the words were echoed by the other listeners—while Zoe shuddered visibly at the bare thought of the terrific dangers which her beloved husband had gone through.

"In the morning," continued Octavian, "I took leave of the old woman without suffering her to suspect that I had overheard a single syllable of the previous night's discourse between herself and the chief of the gang. On gaining the road leading through the forest, I encountered a body of the police: I communicated to them all that had taken place; and they were at once struck with the expediency of acting with the utmost caution in order to effect the capture of the chief and of his whole gang. But inasmuch as I was utterly unable to name a single member of that gang, and the suspicions of the police were totally at fault on the subject, it was necessary to adopt a course which should lead to the accomplishment of a twofold aim: namely, that of discovering and identifying the chief himself, and that of suffering the gang to assemble at the point already known, but the hour of which assembling had yet to be ascertained. I accompanied the police-officials to the Mayor of the nearest village; and after a consultation, it was decided upon following the policy suggested by circumstances."

Octavian paused for a few moments, and then continued in the ensuing manner:—

"I set out in pursuance of my journey; and I expected to reach the Chateau before your party had left it. It however happened otherwise. On meeting my wife, I questioned her relative to the friends who belonged to the party. My suspicions could settle only upon one:—this was the Baron De Margaux; and yet I dared not rush precipitately to the conclusion that he was the criminal. I explained everything to my wife: but I enjoined her to say nothing of all those matters until she should perceive that the *denouement* was approaching. I was afraid that if premature revelations were made, you would not be enabled to control your feelings; and that these feelings being reflected in your looks, would show the Baron that he was suspected and would cause him to decamp—thereby frustrating the ends of justice. You may conceive how difficult it was for me to command my own feelings and exercise a perfect control over the expression of my own countenance, when I found myself in the presence of the Baron. I immediately saw that he was galvanised with terror on beholding me; and yet the miscreant was so much the master of his own feelings that even to me his startled emotion was barely perceptible—while to other lookers-on, unconscious of all that was beneath the surface, it would not have been perceptible at all. That he himself was instantaneously lulled into the belief that I suspected him not, is evident from the fact that he remained with us to prosecute his diabolic plans. The sound of his voice confirmed my suspicion that he *was* the leader of the gang—the wretch whom I had heard last night explaining his iniquitous projects to Dame Roquette. I determined to watch him narrowly; and you saw that when he proposed to issue forth from this tavern under the pretext of remonstrating with the postmaster, I offered to accompany him. And here I should observe that the delay in obtaining the horses was purposely arranged by the police—a hint being given to that effect to the postmaster, so that the whole ramifications of the plan might fully work themselves out. You saw that the false Baron did not wish me to accompany him; and fearful of exciting his suspicions prematurely, I allowed him to go forth alone. But I stole after him: I dogged him to a short distance from the village; and I succeeded in over-hearing some little conversation between himself and his man Moulin. Fortunate was it that circumstances flowed in this channel: for the false Baron ordered Moulin to speed at once into the forest and issue directions to the assembled gang that they were to make some alteration as to the scene of the contemplated attack, for it was now proposed to be effected at a spot further on than that originally intended, no doubt for the purpose of allowing the shades of evening to deepen as much as possible. The false Baron and his man separated: I intercepted the latter—I seized upon him and made him my prisoner. His errand to the forest was thus cut short. A couple of police-officials came up at the time; and I told them all that had occurred. One of them set off with all possible speed to acquaint the main body of the *gendarmerie* that the gang was assembled in the forest, and that the capture might now be effected: the other official, having disposed of his prisoner, fetched some of his comrades to effect the arrest of the false Baron himself. I should observe that from the conversation which took place between the chief and his man Moulin, I learnt that the latter had been all the way to the neighbourhood of the Chateau—that there he had received his chief's instructions——"

"Yes—when the perfidious wretch," exclaimed the Viscount Delorme, "had insidiously ascertained from my lips the settled plan of the day's proceedings."

"No doubt," observed Lord Octavian. "Then the fellow Moulin must have ridden back with all possible despatch to the forest to give Dame Roquette the final instructions; and this second interview between him and the chief was for the purpose of making assurance doubly sure and ascertaining satisfactorily that no part of the plan had been altered by circumstances, and that there was a complete understanding on either side as to all the details. I think that I have now explained everything to you, my friends; and if I suffered so many hours to elapse ere the villain was completely unmasked, it was for the best possible motives."

"Oh! under all circumstances you acted rightly," exclaimed the Viscount Delorme. "But an idea has struck me! This villain whom I had deemed an honourable man and my friend, was doubtless the author of crimes which I had all along attributed to others. May he not have been connected with the gang at Madrid who robbed me on the occasion when he pretended to be the saviour of my life?—may it not have been he who plundered myself and others at the hotel at Barcelona?—may it not likewise have been he who robbed the *danseuse* of her jewels at Naples?—and instead of his contemplated marriage with the daughter of the Spanish Hidalgo being broken off in consequence of some flaw in the lady's character, may it not have been that her father received some whispered warning relative to the evil repute of the false Baron himself?"

"All these facts now speak for themselves," said Lord Octavian, "after the knowledge we have procured of the miscreant's true character. But let us pursue the journey: the town where you originally proposed to halt is but a few miles beyond the village where I first gave information to the municipal authority. It is no doubt at the town itself that the examination of the prisoners will take place."

The journey was resumed accordingly: the forest was traversed without interruption; and while the cavalcade was passing through it, the intelligence was communicated to the travellers that the whole of the band had been arrested by the *gendarmerie* and that Dame Roquette herself had been taken into custody: so that all Lord Octavian's measures were thus shown to have been well taken and his policy was carried out with effect.

CHAPTER CXXXII.

FINETTE.

MEREDITH'S idea was correct in respect to the place where the examination of the prisoners was to be conducted. The band consisted of about a dozen persons, most of whom were woodmen inhabiting the forest, and who during the daytime appeared to be engaged in the most peaceful pursuits. They had been organized by De Margaux himself: and under his leadership they had conducted all their proceedings with so much caution and prudence that the eye of suspicion had never once settled on any of these individuals. Oftentimes had they carried their depredations to a considerable distance,—their absence from their homes even for several days being unnoticed in a vast forest-district where every hut was isolated, and where the rural police seldom passed through the same quarter of the shady wilderness more than once or twice in the course of a week.

It may be asked by the reader what advantage the woodmen reaped by performing the parts of banditti when the necessities of their position compelled an outward show of poverty and forced them to a continual existence in those wretched hovels? And again it may be inquired what good Dame Roquette did herself by her connexion with the band? We may commence our explanations by stating that at the cottage of every criminal arrested on this occasion, considerable sums of money were found hidden in various places: supplies of wines and spirituous liquors were also dragged forth to light; and on the shelves of cupboards, luxuries appeared where only the most frugal fare might have been expected to meet the eye. Thus the members of the banditti had an interior luxury of their own, veiled by the dilapidated walls and wretched thatched roofs of their dwellings: they had the means of rioting in sensuous enjoyment—while the isolated position of each amidst the mazes of that forest, with no jealous neighbour's curious regards ever upon the watch, averted all suspicion. Then again, they accumulated treasure; and their wily chief had represented to them that when they had all enriched themselves they could one by one depart to other climes to enjoy their ill-gotten wealth for the remainder of their days. It would seem that the attack upon the bridal party was intended to be the last exploit of the kind: it was expected to reap a considerable harvest thereby; and several of the band had arranged for a precipitate departure from the forest on the following day. Their hopes were however frustrated and their iniquitous career was cut short, through the wisdom and presence of mind of Lord Octavian Meredith.

The bridal party reached in safety the town where preparations were made for its reception at the principal hotel; and on the following day Lord Octavian, Viscount Delorme, and the notary attended before the authorities to make their respective depositions in the criminal cases then pending. The false Baron De Margaux had recovered all his wonted hardihood when brought up into the presence of the examining magistrate,—though he studiously kept his eyes averted from that part of the crowded police-office which was allotted to the witnesses. There were two distinct cases to be entered into. One was the murder of the two postilions and Octavian's valet: the other was the meditated attack upon the bridal party. In respect to the former crime, Meredith was the only witness; and his evidence tended merely to criminate the false Baron and Dame Roquette, inasmuch as he could not possibly signalize amongst the band those individuals who had assisted in that stupendous enormity. The false Baron and the infamous old woman were accordingly ordered to be committed for trial on that capital charge. In respect to the other offence, the fact of the assemblage of the entire gang was sufficient to inculpate them all; while Meredith, Delorme, and the notary were enabled to give their several testimonies. It was Lord Octavian, however, whose evidence was most important,—that of Delorme and the notary merely tending to show under what circumstances the false Baron had joined their party at the old Chateau and subsequently travelled with it. The result was that the entire gang were committed for trial on the second charge; and that the whole posse of prisoners were sent off under a strong escort of *gendarmerie* to the prison of the principal assise town in the district.

It is our purpose to follow the false Baron De Margaux for the present. Arrived at the prison, he was separated from his companions; and being heavily ironed, was lodged in a cell by himself. The prison was situated on the outskirt of the town: a portion of it was the remnant of an old castle; and there was a deep moat on that side of the building. De Margaux's dungeon was in a round tower overlooking the moat, the stagnant water of which washed its foundations. A single window, with massive iron bars, afforded air and light; and the prisoner through his window could behold the open country stretching far away. There was a court-yard belonging to that portion of the prison to which the tower itself pertained; and there, at stated hours, the captives were permitted to take exercise. Two sentinels were furnished by the garrison of the town to keep watch upon the gaol day and night. One sentinel paced in front of the principal entrance; the other was stationed on the opposite side of the moat to which we have already alluded.

It was noon, on the second day after the committal of the prisoners; and De Margaux was walking alone in the court-yard: for it had been ordered that he should be prevented from holding any communication with the members of his band; and therefore at the time that he took exercise in the yard his subordinate accomplices were secured in their own cells. The authorities naturally inferred that the chief whose desperate character and intelligence had succeeded in organising such a band, and so long eluding not merely the grasp but even the suspicion of justice, must be a person of no ordinary resources; and therefore that if he were allowed opportunities to communicate with his followers, he would most probably devise the means of escape.

De Margaux was therefore walking alone in the court-yard and at the time we have specified. A chain encircled his waist; and thereto were attached irons, which descending as far as his ancles, were there fettered by rings. His hands were free; and it will be understood that the nature of the fetters, however inconvenient to wear, did not prevent locomotion. The criminal had already well studied every detail of that portion of the prison in which he was confined; and while pacing to and fro in the court-yard, he was revolving in his thoughts various projects of escape. The windows of several other compartments of the prison looked upon two adjacent court-yards; and amongst those windows were the casements belonging to the apartments of one of the turnkeys. As De Margaux happened to be looking in that direction, he was struck by the appearance of a young woman, who from a jug was pouring water upon some flowers placed upon the sill. She was not above two-and-twenty—and if not actually handsome nor even pretty, was at least possessed of an interesting countenance. She had a fine pair of dark eyes; and as she smilingly nodded at her father who was engaged in the court-yard below—the one next to that where De Margaux was walking—her cherry lips revealed a very brilliant set of teeth. She was dressed with a certain coquettishness,—the invariable taste of a Frenchwoman having done its best to give effect to even the plainest apparel. De Margaux—whose keen intellect was ever ready to seize upon the slightest circumstance which by any possibility could be turned to his own advantage—raised his hat and made the most courteous bow to the turnkey's daughter.

Finette—for such was the damsel's name—had not before noticed the tall handsome gentlemanly captive; nor did she know for what crime he was imprisoned there. She was struck with his appearance and flattered by his courtesy: a blush rose to her cheeks as she returned the bow. Her father, happening to glance up at the moment, caught her thus nodding to some one; and he exclaimed, "Finette, whom are you noticing?"

This question was put loud enough to catch the ears of De Margaux in the next yard; and Finette, abashed, retired from the window. Her father—a stout, burly, as well as somewhat ill-looking man, and of rather a stern disposition—hastened up to the apartment, and angrily repeated the question. Finette was frightened, and gave no response. The turnkey glanced from the window; and perceiving De Margaux, at once comprehended that he must have been the object of his daughter's interest.

"Wretched girl!" he exclaimed, turning angrily—indeed almost ferociously round upon Finette; "do you know to whom you were bowing? That man, for all his gentlemanly looks, is one of the greatest miscreants that ever came within these walls. He is a murderer!"

"A murderer, father?" cried Finette. "It is impossible! A gentleman with such a distinguished air—such a mien——"

"I tell you, girl, that he is a murderer," interjected the turnkey. "If you had not been staying at your aunt's the day he and his comrades arrived, you would have seen the sensation their presence in the town created."

"But he is not yet tried, father?" said Finette inquiringly.

"No. But why do you ask the question?" exclaimed the turnkey.

"Because it may perhaps be proved that he is falsely charged, and is not so wicked after all. Do you not remember the Marquis who was accused of poisoning his wife, and whose case at first looked so black, but whose innocence was made manifest after all? And do you not recollect likewise the young gentleman that was charged with forgery—a mere boy of one-and-twenty? I told you that I could not believe him to be guilty: you declared that he was; and yet on the day of trial he was acquitted, and the real culprit took his place in the dock. So it may be with that gentleman," added Finette: "because——"

"Hold your tongue, girl," interrupted her father. "It is only because he is good-looking, well-dressed, and of fine manners, that you jump at the conclusion of his innocence. I wonder what the world will come to next! Handsome men can never be guilty in your estimation! If your mother were alive, she would have taught you differently; and it is a pity that I have not time to look more after you. If you go on in this way I shall send you altogether to your aunt in the country——"

"No, my dear father," said Finette, cajolingly, as she threw her arms round his neck, "you will not send me away, because who could attend to your housekeeping?"

"Ah! if it weren't for that," said the man, "it would be different. But no matter! I beg of you, Finette, not to notice prisoners from the window again: and this injunction is all the more necessary, because, as you know, I am going out for a half-holiday, and you will be here by yourself."

Thus ended the conversation between the father and daughter: but Finette's reflections on the same subject were not similarly concluded. She could not possibly persuade herself that the man of such distinguished appearance, of such imposing demeanour, with such dark hair, and so well cultivated a moustache, was a murderer. There was a great deal of romance—the foolish portion of romance, we mean—in the girl's disposition: every volume in the nearest circulating library had been greedily devoured by her; and in every well-dressed, handsome, prepossessing captive she invariably beheld a victim, a martyr, or a hero.

Her father went out for the remainder of the day; and Finette passed into the adjacent room—ostensibly to gossip with the wife of another turnkey, whose lodging it was—but in reality to glean all particulars relative to the charge for which the tall handsome prisoner was incarcerated. She learnt that he was the captain of a formidable gang of forest-banditti, and that all his followers were likewise in custody. The crimes of which they were accused were narrated to her; and though she shuddered while listening, yet she pertinaciously fell back on the belief that the innocence of De Margaux would transpire in respect to the blacker portion of the guilt alleged against him. As for his being the captain of a horde of banditti,—this was something chivalrously romantic and heroically grand in Finette's estimation. She returned to her own room: her father's injunctions were forgotten—or at least disregarded: she approached the window—she received another courteous salute from De Margaux—and she returned it. Be it understood that he had not overheard the conversation which had taken place between the father and daughter: but he felt assured that the girl must know for what he was imprisoned; and he therefore very naturally concluded that she either thought very lightly of the crimes imputed to him, or else disbelieved them—otherwise she would not thus receive and acknowledge his salutations. He made a sign that he wished to speak to her: then he placed his hand upon his heart—and next clasped both hands with an air of entreaty. Finette—deeply compassionating the brigand chief—nodded her head as much as to convey the intimation that she would do something on his behalf; and almost immediately afterwards the hour came at which De Margaux was to be reconsigned to his cell until the evening, when he would be allowed another short interval for exercise in the yard.

Thus was it that Mademoiselle Finette in a very brief space found herself involved in an adventure which appeared to her replete with a charming romance. For the next three or four hours she could settle herself to no occupation: she prepared no food for herself—her needlework remained untouched. The image of the brigand chief, with his fine tall form, his dark eyes, and his glossy moustache, was inseparable from her thoughts.

At six o'clock in the evening De Margaux was again released from his cell, and suffered to walk in the court-yard. Finette had comprehended from his signs that he wished to speak to her. Perhaps he had some message of importance to convey, and which he dared only trust to a friendly medium? perhaps the very proofs of his innocence depended thereon? Who could tell? It would be deplorable if such a life were to be sacrificed for the want of so simple a favour. Finette could not endure the thought; and she resolved to ascertain what De Margaux might have to say to her.

Having thus sophistically brought herself to the conclusion that there could be no possible harm in carrying out her intentions, she lost no time in executing them. All prisoners who were waiting for trial, were permitted to purchase such little luxuries as tobacco, snuff, bottled beer, wine, or spirits; and the turnkeys enjoyed a monopoly of the sale of these articles. Taking a bottle of wine in one hand and a packet of tobacco in the other, Finette descended from her room, and tripped across the court-yard with which that portion of the building communicated. The door opening into De Margaux's yard, was so situated in a corner as to be concealed by an angle of the edifice from the windows of the turnkey's rooms. In this door there was a little *guichet*, or trap, which served as a ready means of communication with any one on the opposite side, and to save the trouble of opening the door itself every time such communication was needful. It was at that *guichet*, too, that friends who came to visit prisoners stood to converse with them.

Opening the *guichet*, Finette looked through into the adjoining yard; and De Margaux instantaneously approached the door. There was no disappointment on either side by this closer view of each other: the false Baron was confirmed in his impression of Finette's pleasing looks—while she herself found the demeanour of the captive to be more distinguished and his manners more enchanting than even in her dreamy imaginings she had anticipated.

"You wished to speak to me?" she said, blushing with confusion, but glancing furtively at De Margaux's countenance from beneath the curtain of her long lashes.

"Yes, beauteous damsel," responded the prisoner; "because by your manner you displayed sympathy towards me."

"True! I felt sympathy," replied the still blushing Finette, "because—because—I could not possibly bring myself to believe——"

"That I am guilty?" ejaculated the false Baron, instantaneously penetrating what was passing in her mind. "No, no! I am not guilty! But to prove my innocence——"

"Thank heaven, you are not guilty!" said Finette: and then deeper grew her blushes at the sudden enthusiasm into which her feelings had thus betrayed her.

"You are pleased that I assure you of my innocence?" said De Margaux. "Amiable and beautiful girl! it is in such moments as these when the soul is sinking beneath the weight of an unjust accusation that the kind sympathy of one of your sex is so ineffably delicious. Ah! if I were free, how joyously would I testify my gratitude—Oh! how joyously—how sincerely!"

"But if you were free," asked Finette, "would you go back to your forest-life? Would you again become the captain of a band, which though gallant, is still lawless?"

"If I were free, sweet maiden," answered De Margaux—who was careful in his responses, and cautiously strove to elicit her sentiments, so that he might take his cue therefrom,—"if I were free, and if you were my companion, your word should be my law—your happiness should be my study—and therefore would I do naught that should in any way militate against your wishes."

"Perhaps—perhaps," faltered the hesitating and blushing Finette, "there is some one whom you long to rejoin—some heart that is beating in anxiety for you—some one whom you love and by whom you are beloved——"

"No," replied De Margaux; "I never until now knew what love is——but I experience its power at this moment! Not for worlds, sweet maiden, would I deceive you! You have given me your sympathy:—that sympathy has touched some chord in my heart—the chord has vibrated—it vibrates now! Maiden, if I were free, I would kneel at your feet—I would offer you my hand—I would place before you the countless treasures which I have amassed, and which are so well concealed in a distant place that there is no fear of their being discovered."

"I am afraid that I do wrong to listen to you," murmured Finette, whose heart throbbed with joy, while a succession of blushes kept suffusing her cheeks: "you must not therefore talk any more in that strain—but rather proceed to tell me what can be done to effect your freedom. Perhaps you need some proof of your innocence? perhaps you have it in your power to show that the crimes were committed by your hand when you were not present,—crimes which you yourself abhor——"

"How strange—how wonderful," cried De Margaux, "that you understand me thus!—that you penetrate into the truth of these circumstances! Surely, surely there must be some unknown but potent sympathy existing between us! Yes—there *is!* It is a mystical transfusion—sympathy begetting love—and love, I hope, engendering love in return!"

Finette's heart went on throbbing, and her cheeks blushing, and her bosom palpitating. There was something magically soft in the voice of the brigand-captain. To be his bride—his companion, in some far-off clime, or in the depths of some forest, were infinitely preferable to a residence in that gloomy prison, along with a father whose temper was not the sweetest in the world, and who even that very day had spoken so harshly to her.

"It is true," continued De Margaux, "that I was not present when the crime was committed,—true also that when I learnt the atrocity my soul was smitten with horror and anguish. But what could I do? It was too late to repair the evil that was done; and while I was thinking of the best mode to punish the offenders, so as to make them an example to the rest of my band, I was captured. In one point only, sweet Finette, have you misunderstood me. There is no evidence I can procure which will prove mine innocence; because it is sufficient that I am the captain of the band in order to be held responsible for all the misdeeds of my followers. Therefore, if I remain here, I shall perish!—the remorseless myrmidons of the law will take the life of him for whom you have entertained such sweet sympathy! I crave freedom therefore that my life may be saved. Is is no false title which I bear—a Baron's rank it mine; and in the fairest Alpine valley do I possess a charming mansion, situated in the midst of delicious pleasure grounds. Oh! that thither I could bear thee as a bride, and that for the rest of our days we could dwell in that delightful spot, in peace, in safety, and in happiness!"

Finette was bewildered by this speech: her brain appeared to reel with dreams of bliss: she already beheld herself the mistress of that beauteous mansion—roaming through that charming Alpine valley—leaning on the arm of a husband of the most elegant mien. Never had those prison-walls appeared so gloomy and odious to the young maiden. De Margaux fathomed all that was passing in her mind: he perceived the advantage he had already gained; and he continued in his insidious discourse.

"To her who began by giving me her sympathy when sympathy was so much needed—to her who listened to my avowal of love—to her who shall afford me the means of saving a life which will be doubly valuable inasmuch as it must be devoted to the delightful task of ensuring her happiness,—Oh, to *her* of whom I am speaking—to *you*, dearest maiden, shall the faithfullest devotion and the tenderest affection be ever due!"

"But how can I help you?—Oh, how I can help you?" asked Finette, now bursting into tears of anguish.

"Weep not," said De Margaux: "every tear you shed falls like molten lead upon my heart. Tell me, beloved one, is not your father one of the turnkeys of the prison?"

"Alas! yes," responded Finette: "and the fact dooms me to an existence within these dreadful walls—an existence which I abhor!"

"He is a turnkey?" said De Margaux. "You can obtain the key from him? you can possess yourself of it?"

"No—impossible!" rejoined Finette, with a look and tone of the deepest sadness.

"Impossible!" echoed De Margaux, for a moment dejected. "But still you can assist me? Yes, you can assist me! Files—a rope——can you not furnish me these?"

"Yes!" ejaculated the maiden, her countenance suddenly brightening up with joy: then, as rapidly sinking with despondency again, she added, "Ah, I comprehend! But the sentinel on the opposite side of the moat?"

"That obstacle, sweet girl, is not insurmountable," responded De Margaux. "Oh, if you would serve me, Finette—if you would serve me, it is not by halves that you must do it. It is a matter of life and death! You know it—you see that it is!"

"Tell me what I can do," said the girl eagerly: for her heart was now full of the most devoted enthusiasm towards this object of her romantic interest.

"You must manage that sentinel for me! I have noticed that the guard comes round to change the sentinels at ten o'clock—then again at midnight. It is the sentinel who will *then* be on duty that you will have to deal with. Can you get out between those hours, Finette?"

"Yes—for fortunately my father has gone to see his sister in the country, and he is sure not to return before midnight—perhaps not even until to-morrow morning. But what am I to do with regard to that sentinel?" she asked.

"Can you not offer him liquor?" said De Margaux: "will you mind doing this for my sake? It is a husband whom you will win, sweet Finette!—a husband who will love you for your devotion and be proud of you for your heroism!"

"I will do anything—everything you tell me!" replied the enthusiastic but infatuated girl.

"You can give the soldier liquor," continued De Margaux; "and the liquor can be drugged. Start not! I mean not to poison the poor wretch: it is a mere soporific that you will administer. One dram of the liquor thus drugged, and he sinks down senseless. My escape will be secured—I join you—we flee together—and in happiness we dwell for the remainder of our days!"

Finette agreed to all that De Margaux suggested: he repeated his instructions relative to the files and the cord; and he explained to her what drug she was to purchase at the chemist's, and with what quantity of spirits she was to mix it. Everything was arranged between them: the infatuated girl gave the captive the wine and the tobacco which she had brought: he pressed to his lips the hand that was passed through the *guichet* —she closed the trap-door—and tripped away across the court: while again her heart was beating with hope—her cheeks covered with blushes.

In about a quarter of an hour Finette returned to the *guichet*, and gave the captive the files and the cord. The joy which he experienced at this proof of her continued infatuation on his behalf, infused an almost real enthusiasm into the language that he again addressed to her: her hand was again pressed to his lips—and again did she flit away with palpitating bosom and blushing cheeks.

CHAPTER CXXXIII.

THE STROLLING PLAYERS.

It was about half-past ten o'clock, and the night was tolerably dark,—when the sentinel pacing to and fro on the opposite side of the moat, fancied that he heard light footsteps approaching. He stopped, and was almost immediately accosted by a female enveloped in a cloak. In accordance with her station and with the custom of her country, she wore no bonnet—but a very neat cap, somewhat coquettishly adorned with pink ribbons. The hood of her cloak was purposely thrown back, so that her face might be recognised if the soldier should happen to be acquainted with her—which she knew to be most probable, inasmuch as the regiment had been long in the town, and every private soldier in it had over and over again mounted guard at the principal entrance of the prison as well as on the bank of the moat in the rear.

"Ah! Mademoiselle Finette!" exclaimed the sentinel: "how happens it that you are out so late?"

"I am going to see a friend who has suddenly been taken very ill: she lives in this direction—a little way farther on—upon the outskirt of the town—and as she is not very well off, I am taking her a bottle of brandy."

"Brandy for an invalid!" ejaculated the sentinel jocosely, but not with the slightest scintillation of suspicion that any treachery was intended. "What can the malady be? Is it cholera?"

"Something of that kind," responded Finette. "At all events my father told me I had better take a bottle of brandy with me: and I have it here in my basket."

"The invalid will not require it all, Mademoiselle Finette," said the soldier: "and therefore——"

"Oh! I dare say," interjected the maiden, as if quite ingenuously, "her husband will help her to dispose of it. All men are fond of brandy——"

"And no one more so than myself," rejoined the sentinel with a laugh: and then he smacked his lips significantly.

"Oh, I did not understand!" said Finette, now laughing likewise. "You shall have a taste and be welcome too!"

Thus speaking, the young woman produced the bottle from her basket, and handed it to the soldier. He lowered his firelock until the butt rested upon the ground; and taking the cork from the bottle, applied the latter to his lips. The draught he imbibed was a long one; and scarcely had he given back the bottle into Finette's hand, when he was seized with a sudden dizziness: he staggered—the musket fell forward upon the ground—and the word "Treachery!" escaped his lips.

But it was only uttered lowly; and the next instant he tumbled heavily backward, with a mingled moaning and gasping voice. Finette was seized with affright: the apprehension smote her that he was dead: but the next instant she recovered her self-possession, as she recollected the information De Margaux had given her as to the mode in which the soporific would operate. Then she drew forth a white kerchief, which she waved for a few moments; and as she desisted, a slight splash in the water at the foot of the tower made her aware that her signal had been discerned through the obscurity of the night. It was the rope which De Margaux lowered from the window.

He had worked well during the three or four hours which had elapsed since he received the files from the hand of Finette. The fetters were no longer upon his limbs: one of the massive bars of the window had been eaten through with the iron teeth of the file: no misadventure had occurred to interfere with his plan of escape. And now Finette, as she stood full of anxious suspense on the verge of the moat, beheld a dark form issuing forth from the window of the tower—then descending by means of the rope—then plashing in the water. The moat was very deep, and at that spot about thirty yards wide: but De Margaux was an excellent swimmer—he struck out—and in a few moments reached the bank where Finette so anxiously awaited him, and on which the unconscious sentinel lay. But the noise of the gurgling water, as he glided rapidly through it, had prevented Finette's ears from catching the sounds of footsteps that were advancing across the field which stretched beyond the moat towards the open country. Thus, at the very instant that the now overjoyed maiden extended her hand to assist De Margaux up the bank, a cry of alarm was thundered forth close behind her.

A shriek pealed from her lips: it was the voice of her father which had spoken!

"Help! help! an escape!" he vociferated. "Good heavens, Finette!—Vile girl!—Ah, miscreant!"

These were the ejaculations which in rapid succession burst from the turnkey's lips; and then he grappled with De Margaux. But the struggle lasted only for an instant: De Margaux possessed the strength of ten thousand: desperation rendered him invincible. He hurled the turnkey away

from him with such terrific force that the unfortunate man fell like a weight of lead upon the ground: and the almost distracted Finette, thinking that her father was killed, threw herself in wild agony upon her knees by his side. De Margaux fled from the spot with the speed of a hunted deer; and the next moment, when Finette raised her eyes, he no longer met her view.

We must follow in the footsteps of the escaped criminal. Away he sped across the fields, alike ignorant and reckless of the way which he was taking. He knew full well that the loud ejaculations of the turnkey must have at once raised an alarm inside the prison, and that a pursuit on horseback would promptly take place. He ran for his life. Naught cared he for poor Finette: naught cared he whether he had slain her father by the violence with which he had hurled him to the ground. About a couple of fields off De Margaux found a horse grazing: with very little trouble he captured the animal; and springing on its back, he urged it to its utmost speed by lashing its sides with a stick which he picked up at the time for the purpose. He rode on for several miles, without saddle, bridle, or halter—until the animal was completely knocked up; and then De Margaux abandoned it. There were lights at a little distance, indicating a village or small town; and De Margaux was about to turn off into another direction, when he said to himself, "No! I will go straight on. Those who may be in pursuit, will think to themselves that I am certain to avoid this place; and that is the very reason why I will enter it. Perhaps I shall find some secure concealment there until the storm has blown over?"

De Margaux approached the lights: and as he drew near some very large building—which he soon discovered to be a barn on the outskirts of the village—his ear caught the sounds of music. Very poor and sorry music it was, however; and

De Margaux fancied that it must belong to some itinerant show. He went on; and in a few minutes reached a door at the back of the barn. It stood ajar: he peeped in—and by a dim light which prevailed inside, he perceived that a quantity of straw was piled up against the wall on the right hand just inside the door, and to the distance of about four yards forward. Thus a narrow passage was left from the door to what appeared to be a blanket or dingy sort of drapery, stretching all across the barn and forming a screen to shut out the compartment where the straw was. The sounds of ranting voices, the trampling of feet upon boards, mingled with the applause and laughter of an audience, convinced De Margaux that his first impression was right, and that the performances of some itinerant players were taking place.

"The very last spot in the world," thought De Margaux, "where pursuers would have an idea of looking for me!"—and seizing upon a moment when the applause was long and uproarious, he introduced himself—or rather worked his way, into the midst of the straw; so that he was completely embedded therein—while the noise of the crackling material was drowned by the din of the delighted audience.

The adventurous and chequered career of De Margaux had taken him at times into several countries. We have seen from the explanations of the Viscount Delorme, that he had visited Spain and Italy: we may now add that the British shores had likewise on one occasion been favoured with his presence when the meridian of the French capital was found to be inconveniently hot for a period. Keen, quick-witted, and naturally intelligent, De Margaux readily picked up in a short time a sufficiency of any foreign language to make himself understood; and he had not failed, when in England, to profit by his sojourn there in the same respect. He therefore now had no difficulty in comprehending that it was a company of English strolling players to whose recitations accident was rendering him a listener. He began to reflect that he might turn the circumstance to his advantage. He had a passport, it is true: but it was such an one that he dared not exhibit, inasmuch as it would at once establish his identity. He could not travel without one, if he proceeded alone; and even if he were to shave off his moustache and disguise his person to the utmost of his power, he could not obtain another passport at any town without exhibiting his former one. That there would be a hue and cry, the issue of handbills and the posting of placards offering a reward for his apprehension, he knew full well; and he saw that the best chance for him to escape out of the district, was to mingle with the itinerant company, assume some deep disguise, and travel under the general protecting influence of the manager's passport for his whole troop.

Scarcely had De Margaux revolved these matters in his mind, when the curtain dropped, and the two or three fiddles forming the orchestra struck up a tune. The drapery separating the straw-compartment from the raised platform forming the stage, was now drawn aside; and from his hiding-place De Margaux could obtain a view of the performers. They were evidently of the poorest description: their whole appearance bespoke poverty:—yet was there a great deal of natural gaiety and good-humour amongst them,—as was evidenced by the manner in which they took advantage of the interval between the Acts to partake of refreshment, and the way in which they divided their humble fare with one another. After some trifling changes in the toilets of two or three of them, the partition-drapery was again closed—the curtain drew up—and the play proceeded. The audience was almost entirely French—while the performances were in English: but all proceeded to the infinite satisfaction of the spectators—who, if they comprehended nothing of the splendid orations delivered, were at least hugely delighted with the grimaces and antics of the Clown. Thus the curtain at length fell finally amidst the applause of the entire audience.

We should observe that De Margaux had not the smallest coin in his pocket: all the money he had about him at the time of his arrest, had been taken from him. Neither had he any resources elsewhere,—the tale he had told Finette of his hidden treasures, being as false as that of his beautiful Alpine domain. He was a man addicted to pleasures and profligacies of every description, amongst which gambling was included; and therefore whenever his purse was well filled as the result of some scheme of villany, it was his wont to repair to the great towns in that part of France, and plunge into all kinds of dissipation until his necessities drove him back to the forest to devise some new project or perpetrate some fresh turpitude to refill his pockets. Thus, at the present moment, De Margaux was utterly penniless; and this circumstance rendered it all the more expedient for him to seize, if possible, upon the opportunity to mingle with the itinerant troop.

The barn had been kindly lent by a farmer to this poor travelling company, not merely to serve as the theatre of their performances, but likewise as their temporary abiding-place while they were in that neighbourhood. On the dispersion of the audience, one of the actors issued forth to take down the lamps, or rather lanterns, which had been suspended in front of the barn; and on his return the doors were closed in order to make all safe for the night. Then the manager began counting the proceeds, the troop eagerly gathering around him to hear his report,—although each individual had in his own mind already calculated to almost a fraction what the amount would be. Without precisely specifying it, we may observe that it was of an extent to cheer their humble hearts, and to banish all cares for the present. De Margaux failed not to observe the good-humour and satisfaction which thus prevailed; and he now thought it high time to take advantage of those feelings.

Without being perceived by any of the company, he crept forth from his hiding-place, and suddenly opened and closed the back door as if he had only that instant rushed in. Then the members of the troop all looked round from the middle of the barn where they were assembled; and by the dim light of the single candle which they had left burning, they observed a tall, well-dressed man, of commanding appearance, hurriedly approaching them. A nearer view showed that his garments were shining as if with a recent immersion in water; while his aspect bore the evidences of something very unusual having occurred. His apparel in some parts was stained with mud; and pieces of straw were amongst his hair and whiskers.

His tale—as a matter of course an invented one—was speedily told. He was a gentleman who had experienced the misfortune of losing a very large sum of money through the dishonesty of a friend whom he had trusted; his creditors had dealt harshly with him; they had set the bailiffs on his track; and it was with the utmost trouble, after fording a river and hiding in a farm-yard, that he had succeeded in eluding those harpies of the law. All he wanted was a little temporary succour; for if he could once get to Paris, he had wealthy friends residing there, whose purses would be placed at his disposal; and he should then be enabled most liberally to reward those who might now assist him in his need.

Such were the explanations given by De Margaux to the troop of strolling players; and the effect his words produced was precisely such as he had anticipated. He had enlisted their sympathies by the tale of his misfortunes: he had excited their cupidity by his promises of eventual reward. Their offers of services were promptly and heartily made; and it was left to himself to point out in which manner they could be best rendered available. A disguise, to enable him to elude the bailiffs—his amalgamation, so to speak, amongst the troop, that he might journey under the protection of the passport which served them in common—and a removal from that neighbourhood with the least possible delay,—these were the boons which De Margaux required and the suggestions which he had to offer.

The members of the company had only heard vague reports relative to the capture of a horde of banditti: they were too much occupied with their own concerns to pay particular attention to what was passing around them in a foreign country. Thus, not for a single instant did they mistrust the tale so speciously told them by De Margaux, nor suspect that he was aught beyond what he represented himself. The strollers consisted of about a dozen persons, including the "violins" and the "flageolet;" and three or four of them were females. With these latter De Margaux became an object of especial sympathy: they considered it so shocking that a gentleman with such a handsome moustache should have been deceived by a false friend and hunted by bailiffs through the muddy waters of a river and the slough of a farm-yard. It was a matter of perfect indifference to the entire troop of strollers as to the particular direction in which they proceeded; and they therefore readily yielded to the wish expressed by De Margaux, that by a circuitous route they should make for the capital. A removal from the village-barn at a very early hour in the morning was accordingly resolved upon: but in the meanwhile it was necessary that De Margaux should effectually disguise himself. He commenced by shaving off the moustache and the luxuriant whiskers which had so captivated the ladies of the troop: he likewise cropped the rich growth of his hair. The whole of his face being clean shaved, at once altered his appearance considerably; and a brown wig, supplied by the "theatrical properties," completed the metamorphosis in respect to the head. His own apparel was exchanged for a rusty suit, of quite a different style and fashion, which the manager lent him; and thus, when his toilet was accomplished in a corner of the barn behind a portion of the hanging scenery, it was next to impossible to recognise the late fashionable and almost brilliant De Margaux in the fallen, dilapidated appearance which he now presented. At a very early hour in the morning, a cart was borrowed from the good-natured farmer who had lent the barn; and the strollers, with their new acquaintance and the boxes containing their theatrical properties, took their departure for another place,—De Margaux being careful to direct them in a route which carried him farther off from the scene of his late exploits.

Hitherto he had succeeded in a manner which almost transcended the hopes and expectations he entertained when first resolving to make use of this itinerant company for his own purposes. But still one source of dread haunted his mind. What if any of his companions, two or three of whom understood French, should happen to read the placards which, as he had foreseen, had sprung as it were into existence in a marvellously short space of time? They could scarcely fail to identify him as the escaped felon whose personal appearance at the time of his flight, was described with such painful accuracy in those bills. But he managed so to beguile the way with his conversation—he told so many anecdotes to interest his new companions, that he succeeded in engrossing their whole attention, and preventing them from fixing their regards on a single placard on any of the walls or fences by which they passed. Fortunately likewise, the farmer's man, who drove the cart, could not read; and thus every circumstance appeared to progress favourably for our adventurer.

CHAPTER CXXXIV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

We must now take a temporary leave of the strolling players, and return to the prison whence De Margaux had escaped.

Finette, it will be remembered, had thrown herself in a state of distraction upon the prostrate and inanimate form of her sire, whom she believed to have been killed by the violence with which he was hurled to the ground. He however speedily showed signs of life; and thus a tremendous weight was lifted from the mind of the unfortunate Finette. The alarm raised by the turnkey immediately previous to his struggle with De Margaux, had reached the ears of his brother-doorkeepers inside the prison, as well as of the sentinel who paced in front of it. Several persons therefore were soon upon the spot where the conflict had taken place, and where the drugged soldier still lay senseless, while Finette's father was coming back to consciousness. The fact that De Margaux had escaped was quickly made known; a pursuit was instituted in every direction; and a printing-press in the town was promptly set to work to turn out bills and placards offering a reward for his capture. A mounted police-officer passed through the very village in the neighbourhood of which De Margaux was at the time making friends with the strollers: but the constable was assured that no person at all answering the felon's description had been seen in the place.

Meanwhile the drugged sentinel was restored to consciousness; and the luckless Finette—amidst torrents of tears and agonized appeals for pardon —confessed all the details of her connivance in the prisoner's escape. By her father she was overwhelmed with reproaches: the sentinel to whom she had given the drugged brandy, upbraided her with an almost equal bitterness: her sire's brother-turnkeys were scarcely less warm in the expression of their sentiments. The unhappy girl was quickly rescued from her infatuation with reference to De Margaux. She now learnt that he himself was in reality a murderer—that there could be no possible mistake on the subject, for that Dame Roquette had that very evening made the fullest and most ample revelations to the gaol-chaplain. The conviction was forced upon Finette, too, that De Margaux was an accomplished deceiver—that his tales of buried treasure and of an Alpine villa were all utterly false—and that he had imposed upon her credulity in every possible way in order to further his own ends. The girl was plunged into the very abyss of mental wretchedness: she was shocked at her own foolish infatuation; and being far from deficient in good principle at the bottom of all her giddiness, she was ready to die with shame, as well as to sink beneath the upbraidings of those by whom she was surrounded.

It was necessary to make an immediate report to the governor of the gaol, who at the time was sleeping soundly in his bed; and this functionary was seized with a violent rage. Finette's father had obtained a half-holiday on the understanding that he was to return to his quarters at eight o'clock that evening: his dereliction of duty was therefore discovered; and the governor failed not to reproach him with the fact that if he had adhered to the rules of the prison, his daughter could not have found an opportunity to carry out her designs. The consequence was that in the morning Finette's father received his dismissal, accompanied with an intimation on the part of the police that he had better get out of the town with the least possible delay, if he were desirous to avoid a still more rigorous chastisement.

This hurricane of calamities well nigh broke poor Finette's heart. Her aunt—to whom a flying visit was paid as she accompanied her father from the town—read her the severest lecture for the mingled folly and wickedness of which she had been guilty, and positively refused to give her an asylum while her father sought for employment elsewhere. The ex-turnkey was accordingly compelled to take his daughter with him: and as he had a brother who was comfortably settled as a draper in a town about eighty miles distant, he resolved to proceed thither in the hope that something might be done for him. He possessed some little savings, to the extent of eighteen or twenty pounds, speaking in English money: and thus he was not as yet compelled to look absolute poverty in the face.

In the *rotonde*, or cheapest part of the *diligence* (stage-coach), the ex-turnkey and Finette took their places for the town to which we have just alluded. Unfortunately for the poor girl, they were the only travellers in that division of the vehicle; and thus her father failed not to continue his upbraidings as they journeyed onward. Finette wept bitterly: she over and over again avowed all her folly and wickedness, and besought her sire's pardon. But he was one of those men who could not be very easily appeased, and who in any case must give the fullest vent to their ill-humour before the word "pardon" could possibly escape their lips. At length the ex-turnkey talked himself off to sleep; and Finette sat pensive and miserable, looking listlessly from the window of the *diligence*.

At one of the post-houses where the coach stopped to change horses—and while her father continued to sleep soundly—Finette's eyes settled upon a placard posted against the wall immediately opposite the window of the *diligence*. She beheld the name of De Margaux: she read the placard: it offered a reward of a thousand francs (forty pounds sterling) for the apprehension of the escaped prisoner. The contents of this bill put Finette's feelings to a new and final test: such an impulse was given to her thoughts that she now unmistakably comprehended whether there were any lingering remnant of the late infatuation in her soul—or whether her love had turned to hatred. She understood likewise whether, if De Margaux suddenly appeared before her, even with veritable proofs of his buried treasure and of his Alpine villa, she would flee away with him to share his riches,—or whether she would remain with her sire, to endure his upbraidings as often as the humour for venting them might take possession of him.

The *diligence* continued its way, and Finette shed no more tears—but remained plunged in deep and gloomy meditation, until her father woke up and renewed his reproaches. Finette listened to them in silence: she no longer entreated his forgiveness—there was even something dull and apathetic in the appearance of the young girl. Her father deemed her indifferent to the calamities which had overtaken him; and he redoubled his upbraidings. Still Finette said nothing; and again did the ex-turnkey talk till he was tired—so that relapsing into slumber, he slept for the last three or four hours of the journey.

The night was setting in when the *diligence* entered the town which was the destination of Finette and her father. It was too late for them to call on their relation until the morrow; and they therefore took up their quarters at a small inn—or rather public-house, in the neighbourhood of the office where the coach stopped. In the morning the ex-turnkey set out to proceed alone, in the first instance, to his brother's: but on arriving at the house he found that its master had gone on the preceding day to Paris, where he was likely to be detained for a week. The draper was an unmarried man, and had left his little establishment in the charge of a clerk; so that the ex-turnkey could not even obtain an asylum at the house until his brother's return. As the reader may suppose, he retraced his way to the tavern in no very enviable humour, and fully prepared to vent all his vexation upon the head of poor Finette.

The young girl still bore her sire's treatment in uncomplaining silence, and with an air of dull and listless apathy. He resolved to remain at the public-house until his brother should return; and thus a week went by. During this interval Finette was most attentive to her father in all the ministrations which as a daughter she could display: but she never once answered him when he reproached her—nor did she again beseech his forgiveness. He began to think that he had mistaken her disposition—that she was not really indifferent nor apathetic—but that her spirit was broken. He therefore thought that he had said enough to her—probably too much; and he suddenly desisted from his upbraidings, though he was of too dogged and morose a nature to volunteer the pardon which was now no longer asked.

The brother returned from Paris, having experienced a considerable pecuniary loss by the business which had taken him thither. He himself was of a rugged and unfeeling disposition, devoted to money-grubbing pursuits: he showed no inclination to assist his brother with his purse, though he was ready enough to proffer his counsel, and likewise to lecture Finette severely for her own misconduct. He somewhat churlishly said that his relations might stay with him for a short time, until they could settle themselves in some manner; and thus they shifted their quarters to his house from the tavern where they had been staying. Finette's father had in the meanwhile been looking about for some employment: but he could find nothing that suited him. There was a shop doing a good little business to be disposed of; and it was in a trade which the ex-turnkey and his daughter could manage: but the purchase-money was fifty pounds, and Finette's father had only about fifteen left. His brother would not advance him a single franc; and thus he found himself compelled to renounce the hope of obtaining a business which would have afforded him a better livelihood than even that post of turnkey from which he had so lately been discharged.

One afternoon—about ten days after the arrival of Finette and her father in the town of which we are speaking—the young damsel strolled forth in a very disconsolate mood. Feeling that her parent and herself were regarded as a burden upon the means of her avaricious uncle, she longed to use her own industry for the purpose of earning something. She had on the previous day applied in various quarters for needle-work—but without being enabled to obtain it. She now renewed her applications—but still without success. At two or three warehouses which she entered, she experienced overtures on the part of insolent clerks or masters which brought the blood up to her cheeks; and on one occasion so gross was the insult she received, she burst into tears and went weeping along the street. Perceiving that she was the object of attention with the passers-by—and unable to restrain her sobs—she issued out of the town towards a grove which bounded it in that particular direction. There she sat down upon a bank where some autumnal flowers bespangled the grass; and wiping away her tears, she fell into a profound reverie.

We have already said that Finette was exceedingly pretty; and it was distressing to think that a young girl endowed with so many personal charms, and whose errors had been those of the head rather than of the mind, should now experience so much deep affliction. But thus it was. She felt that her father was almost ruined; and she reproached herself as the cause. Apart however from these self-upbraidings, there was something brooding in her mind—an idea which for several days past she had rivetted her attention upon,—an idea which she longed to carry out, but for which purpose she knew not the means.

Finette had been seated for perhaps about half-an-hour on that flower-bespangled bank, embowered amidst the verdure of the grove,—when she heard footsteps approaching; and looking up, she beheld a strange figure. It was a tall man, with his face clean shaven—wearing an ample brown wig, indifferently frizzed, and surmounted by a hat with slouching brims. His apparel was of the very shabbiest description, and scarcely seemed to have been originally made for him. His linen was far from the cleanest; and altogether he looked not one who might be classed amongst the number of fortune's favourites. We need hardly inform the reader that this was none other than De Margaux. The troop of strolling players had arrived in the town that very morning, and were to exhibit themselves at the theatre in the evening. De Margaux —who took no share in the stage-performances, but only managed to render himself useful behind the scenes—was invariably accustomed to seek as much privacy as possible during the daytime, for fear lest at any town where they stopped he might encounter an officer sufficiently lynx-eyed to penetrate through his disguise. Thus, on the present occasion, he had left his companions at the tavern where they put up; and quitting the town, he had sought the grove with the intention of plunging into its depths and reposing himself until the shades of evening closed in. While threading his way into the midst of the wood, he beheld a female seated upon a bank: and before she herself had raised her countenance, he had recognised Finette.

It immediately struck De Margaux that the young girl had either been compelled by circumstances, or else prompted by her infatuation, to abandon her home and launch herself forth in the world in search of him. His natural pride and conceit engendered this belief in a moment; and in other respects it was certainly natural enough, when he found her so far from her native place—the more especially as it never struck De Margaux that her father might have lost his situation through his daughter's imprudence. He did not however immediately advance towards her: he stood still for a few moments to see if she recognised him. But after simply glancing at De Margaux, Finette averted her eyes: she had not the remotest suspicion that in the comparatively miserable object before her, she beheld the handsome, elegant-mannered, fascinating individual who for several hours had obtained over her heart a degree of influence such as in ordinary cases an acquaintance of months and years could scarcely have engendered.

De Margaux looked around: Finette was evidently alone: she had relapsed into her gloomy reverie—she was apparently in a distressed state of mind. De Margaux therefore felt convinced that she was a wanderer, either voluntary or outcast, from the paternal home; and touched by her exceeding beauty—of which he had retained a vivid impression, though not one particle of real love did he experience for her—he longed to possess her as a mistress.

Approaching her, he said in the most harmonious accents of his naturally fine voice, "Finette, do you not know me?"

For an instant the young damsel started as if suddenly stung by a serpent lurking amidst the grass whereon she sat; and her dark eyes swept their looks hastily over De Margaux's form. At the same time an expression, which appeared to be that of terror, flitted across her features: but it was instantaneously succeeded by a smile; and springing up from her seat, she ejaculated with an air of mingled astonishment and joy, "Good heavens, sir! is it you?"

"Yes, dearest Finette," responded De Margaux; "it is I who have never ceased to love you!"—and he threw his arm round her waist.

"Oh, if this were true!" she ejaculated, quickly disengaging herself, and springing back a pace or two as if for the purpose of studying his countenance well, that she might know whether she dared confide in him.

"Yes, Finette—it is true!" exclaimed De Margaux. "Tell me—does the assurance give you pleasure? Have you been looking for me?"

"Yes!" cried the young damsel, giving an affirmative in her turn. "Oh! I have wandered and wandered so far and so wearily!"

"It is, then, as I thought!" cried De Margaux. "You were not angry with me, Finette, that I fled so precipitately on that memorable night——"

"Angry with you?" she ejaculated. "Oh, no! In one sense, I rejoiced that you succeeded in effecting your escape—though in another sense I was very, very sad——"

"Ah, I comprehend you, dearest Finette!" said the villain, assuming a look of the deepest tenderness, while he took her hand which she abandoned to him. "You were sad because I was compelled to fly alone and that you were unable to accompany me? Ah! my dear Finette, I have been truly wretched on your account! I have pictured to myself all kinds of horrors—your father's indignation—his brutal treatment of you——"

"I remained not to encounter it," answered Finette: "he would have killed me if I had stayed! I fled from home—I have wandered about——"

"And you confess, dearest girl, that you entertained the hope of falling in with me?" said De Margaux.

"Oh!" exclaimed Finette, her countenance lighting up with a sudden animation; "if I had not entertained this hope, I could not have supported myself under the sense of such terrible calamities! Yes—oh, yes! I have longed to fall in with you!"

"Dear, dear Finette!"—and De Margaux strained her to his breast. "Dearest Finette, how I love you!"

"But you?" she said, again disengaging herself from his arms, "were you veritably and truly happy thus to fall in with me?"

"Can you possibly doubt it?" exclaimed De Margaux. "Shall I tell you wherefore I assumed this disguise? It was not so much to assist in eventually effecting my escape from the pursuit set after me, as to carry out a desperate purpose which I had formed. It was my intention to dare everything on your account—to retrace my way—yes, at any risk, no matter how great——"

"Oh, then, you really love me?" cried Finette, a joyous expression appearing upon her countenance: "and you were coming in search of me?"

"Yes! And now that we have met, dearest one," said De Margaux, "it shall be to part no more! Will you not give me a similar assurance?"

Finette looked up with her beautiful black eyes into the villain's countenance for a moment: then she suddenly cast her glances downward—and while a blush suffused her cheeks, she murmured, "But you will make me your wife?"

"Oh, assuredly!" exclaimed De Margaux; "I will fulfil every promise I made to you at the time! Ah, by the bye, did those people at the gaol endeavour to set you against me? did they vilify me in your hearing? did they——"

"My feelings were too bewildered with mingled joy and grief, as I have already explained to you," answered Finette, "to enable me to attend to anything which was said at the time. The rest of that night I passed at our quarters in the prison: but very early in the morning I gathered together my few jewels and my little savings—three or four hundred francs—and I fled."

"And those jewels? and those savings?" said De Margaux, inwardly chuckling at the intelligence he had just received, and resolving to cut the society of the strolling players with the least possible delay in order to make Finette his sole companion.

"My jewels and my money," responded the young damsel, "are at a little lodging which I have taken in the town. Oh! I have been very economical, I can assure you! for I did not know how long it might be before——"

"Before you and I encountered each other again?" said De Margaux: "is it not so? Ah, that tell-tale blush, my sweet Finette! Well, you have husbanded your resources; and it is so much the better. We will fly away together at once! We will proceed into Switzerland: and there the priest shall join our hands in marriage. When will you come, dearest? when will you be ready to set off?"

"Oh! if I thought you would be always kind and good to me," said Finette,—"that you would always speak as gently and as fondly as you are speaking now——"

"Can you possibly distrust me? can you doubt my love?" asked De Margaux, taking her hand and gazing with passion upon her countenance,—but with a passion most sensuously different from that which his words appeared to express.

"I believe you—Oh, I believe you!" exclaimed Finette. "It will take me an hour to complete my little preparations——"

"And then you will rejoin me?" cried De Margaux. "And where is there a better spot for our next meeting than this very one where we have been so happily brought together? I will await you here, Finette. Need I hint, dearest girl, at the necessity of observing the utmost caution? You will not breathe a syllable to a soul——"

"Oh! rest assured," exclaimed the young damsel, "that all my precautions shall be taken with the most careful regard as to the result. And now farewell for the present! You will be sure to meet me here——"

"And you, Finette, will be sure to come?"

"Within the hour that is passing," she rejoined: and giving him her hand for a moment, she glided away from his presence.

Finette issued from the wood, and sped back into the town. On arriving at her uncle's house, she found her father sitting in a gloomy mood in the parlour, up-stairs, above the shop.

"Where have you been, Finette?" he angrily demanded: for through vexation and disappointment all his irritable feelings had suddenly revived against his daughter. "I will not have you wandering about by yourself——you will get into mischief—and even worse things will happen to you than what has already taken place."

"No, father—never!" exclaimed Finette vehemently.

"Then if you mean to keep yourself steady and respectable for the future," continued her sire, "you would do well to look out for some employment, or else for a situation. I cannot keep you in idleness——I mean to take a situation myself, however humble it may be; for I will not live as a burden upon your uncle, who seems to grudge us every morsel of food we put into our mouths. Oh, Finette! you have been my ruin!"

"Say not so, father! And yet it is too true! Relative to that shop which you thought of taking——"

"Nonsense, the shop!" vociferated the ex-turnkey: "you know that I have not the means—and it is just the same as if you were throwing my poverty in my teeth."

"But is it not possible," proceeded Finette, "to raise by any means what you require?"

"Ah! if I could make a thousand stones into as many francs," exclaimed the ex-turnkey, with morose bitterness, "I might enter in possession of the shop to-morrow. But as it is, that idea is all vain! And now, Finette——"

"Father," she interrupted him—at the same time gazing on his countenance with a peculiar significancy,—"will you follow my instructions?—I mean, will you act according to the advice I am about to give you?"

"Why, what does the girl mean?" exclaimed her sire, thinking for a moment that her intellects were affected.

"You must ask me no questions, but do as I suggest:"—and there was something in the damsel's look and manner which induced her father to attend very seriously to the words she was about to speak.

"What am I to do, Finette?" he inquired.

"Procure a stout cord," she replied; "and in half-an-hour come to the verge of that grove which you perceive at the extremity of this long street. Do not penetrate into the grove until you hear me call you."

"What child's play is this?" demanded the ex-turnkey angrily. "I thought you were going to tell me of some means whereby to obtain employment, and which had perhaps accidentally come to your knowledge."

"It is a simple thing, father, which I ask you to do," responded Finette; "and you will not be long ere you learn my object. I do not think that you will then be angry. You must know, dear father, that whatever my faults, I am incapable of making you the object of a jest."

"Well then, Finette, I will act according to your bidding. A stout cord, you say? and I am to remain on the outskirt of the grove until you summon me into its depths? I cannot for the life of me conceive——"

"Father, I will give you no explanations now!" interrupted the damsel. "Do what I have said—and you will thank me. Fail—and you will be sorry!"

Without waiting for any response, Finette hurried from the room. She proceeded to her own chamber, where she packed a number of articles in a tolerably large market-basket; and slinging this to her arm she again went forth from the house. Proceeding straight to a tavern she purchased a bottle of wine, which she placed in her basket. She thence repaired to a chemist's, at whose establishment she bought some fluid drug: and having also consigned the phial to her basket, she continued her way. On emerging from the town, she stopped in a sheltered place—a sort of open shed—and there she remained for a few minutes, while she poured forth a portion of the wine and filled up the bottle with the contents of the phial procured at the chemist's. She then sped to the grove; and plunging into its depths, found De Margaux anxiously expecting her arrival.

"You are come, dearest Finette!" he exclaimed, springing forward to receive her; "and all your preparations are complete," he added, glancing at the basket.

"Yes," she replied. "I have not kept you long in suspense. But whither are we to go? in which direction are we to bend our way? and how are we to travel?"

"It depends, dear girl," said De Margaux, "on the extent of our resources. To speak frankly, I am utterly denuded of funds until we reach Switzerland; and there——But methought you spoke of a few hundred francs?"

"Yes," rejoined Finette; and then, with an air of ingenuousness, she asked, "Will such a sum suffice to take us into Switzerland?"

"To be sure!" exclaimed De Margaux; and greedily anxious to ascertain the amount which, through the medium of Finette, he thought himself able to command, he added, "But let us ascertain precisely the state of our finances. Come, let us sit down for a few minutes; and we will deliberate on our plans."

The damsel sat down accordingly; and De Margaux placed himself by her side. Holding the basket in her lap, she opened it, as if about to produce her money and jewels;—and lest the mention of jewels in respect to a French turnkey's daughter should appear strange to the English reader, we may as well observe that there are few females of the humbler class in France who do not possess their trinkets of this description.

"Ah! what have you there?" exclaimed De Margaux, who, the instant the basket was opened, caught sight of the bottle which was lying on the top of all the other articles that Finette had packed together ere leaving the house.

"It is a bottle of wine which I have purchased for our refreshment," responded Finette: "for I knew not whether we should have to journey on foot——"

"Nothing could come more acceptably!" exclaimed De Margaux: "for I am suffocating with thirst."

"Oh! how glad I am," cried Finette, with an expression of joy upon her countenance, "that I should have had this forethought!"

Thus speaking, she took out the bottle from the basket, and handed it to De Margaux.

"I am afraid it is only poor wine," observed Finette: "for I did not like to be too extravagant."

"Right, dear girl!" said De Margaux. "I have no doubt it will be good enough for me to celebrate in a long draught this happy meeting, which has restored us to each other."

With these words, De Margaux applied the bottle to his lips; and being in reality sore athirst at the time, he imbibed a considerable quantity. Finette watched him with a singular expression of countenance,—eager suspense being mingled with terror,—until all in a moment the bottle fell from his hand, and the remainder of its contents poured forth upon the grass. Finette sprang up to her feet, and darted back a few paces as if to place herself at such a distance that the villain should not be enabled to do her a mischief. A fiend-like expression suddenly took possession of his countenance: he strove to rise from the bank—but he could not; and with the words, "Wretch! treachery!" upon his lips, he sank helplessly back against a tree.

"Ah, it is the lesson which you taught me!" exclaimed Finette: and then she cried out, "Father—father—come!"

In a few moments the rapid approach of some one through the wood reached the damsel's ears; and her sire was quickly upon the spot. He beheld an unconscious form lying upon the bank: the first idea which struck him was that the man was dead; and with a look full of horrified alarm, he glanced towards his daughter.

"He is not dead, father!" said Finette: "he is only as that sentinel was the other night on the verge of the moat. The lesson he has taught me——"

"What, Finette?" ejaculated her father, as a light flashed in unto his mind: "is it possible? But no! What does it all mean? This is not——"

"Yes, father," said the damsel, quietly: "this is De Margaux. Bind him—he is your prisoner—you alone have captured him—there is none to dispute your right to the reward—nor to demand a share of it. And it will enable you to take possession of the shop to morrow!"

Finette's father listened in mingled astonishment and joy at these words which flowed from her lips: and he lost no time in fastening around the limbs of the unconscious De Margaux the cord which he had brought.

"Now, Finette," he exclaimed, half wild with delight, "let me embrace thee, girl!—and you shall never hear another syllable of reproach from my lips! No—you have atoned for your faults! Forsooth, after all, I am glad that it has happened! We shall be better off than ever we were!"

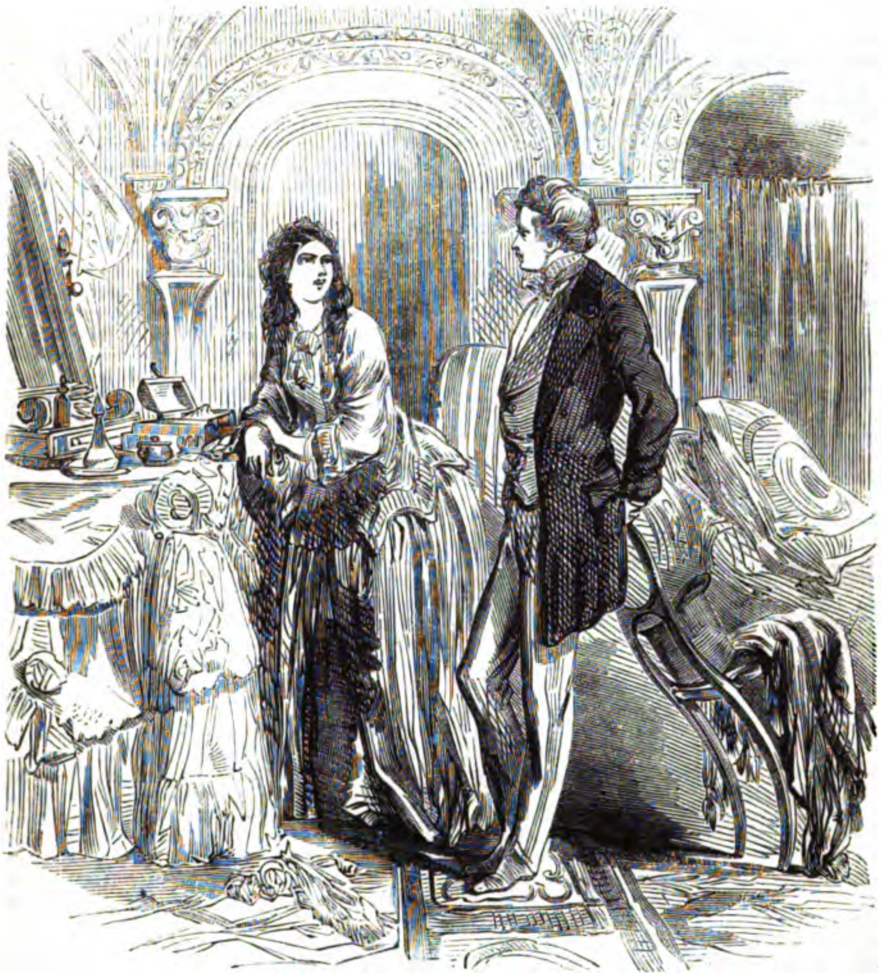
He embraced his daughter: but she rather submitted to his caress than received it with satisfaction; and he exclaimed, "Why, what ails you, girl? You do not seem happy——"

"Father," she responded, with a strange seriousness of countenance—a seriousness which even appeared to have something sinister and ominous in it,—"I have done something which will for ever prevent me from knowing what happiness is in this life. I have betrayed a fellow-creature to the scaffold for the sake of gold. All murderer though he be, I would not have done this, were it not that I had an atonement to make unto yourself. My conduct towards that man has this day been fraught with a degree of dissimulation and treachery which—all murderer though he be, I repeat—I am utterly ashamed of, and for which I loathe myself. However—*you*, father, will now reproach me no more. The idea has been hovering in my mind from the very first moment that I read the placard offering a reward for that man's apprehension. It was when we were journeying in the *diligence*—and when I was nearly driven to madness by your reproaches. Oh! then I said to myself, 'If I could surrender him up to justice!'—Ah! the idea was then vague and shadowy enough: but it has been fulfilled. It is done, father——the atonement is made—and you will be enabled to settle yourself in life. Hark! a vehicle is passing! I will return in a few moments."

With these words, Finette glided away from the presence of her sire,—who was half astonished, half frightened at the singular language in which she had just addressed him. He was not however on that account inclined to abandon his prey; and he stooped down to assure himself that the cord was firmly knotted upon the limbs of the unconscious De Margaux. Meanwhile Finette had sped into the road, where she stopped a baker's cart that was passing. Into this vehicle the still inanimate De Margaux was conveyed; and when he came back to consciousness, he was the inmate of a dungeon, with chains upon his limbs.

Ere closing the present chapter, we may bring this episode to a termination. Finette's father claimed and received the reward which was offered for the apprehension of De Margaux; and he was enabled to take the shop which he had so much coveted. His business has thriven; and he is now a man well to do in the world. His daughter Finette still lives: but she is only the shadow of her former self: she is pale, thin, and wasted. She is never seen to smile; and she moves slowly and noiselessly as a ghost about her father's house when superintending the domestic arrangements. Her words spoken in the grove, were indeed too prophetically true. Finette and happiness have shaken hands for ever.

The confession of Dame Roquette implicated several of the gang in the murder of the two postilions and Lord Octavian's valet. The wretches whose guilt was thus made manifest, suffered along with De Margaux on the scaffold of the guillotine: Dame Roquette and the rest of the band were visited with the next severest penalties of the law;—and thus justice succeeded in overtaking all the offenders who were implicated in the crimes of the forest.



CHAPTER CXXXV.

THE DUKE AND HIS MISTRESS.

THE scene now changes to the British metropolis again; and we must introduce the reader to the interior of the house which the Duke of Marchmont had taken in a fashionable quarter for the accommodation of his mistress, Mrs. Oxenden. The reader cannot have forgotten the circumstances under which this lady had foisted, if not forced herself upon the protection of the Duke; for be it borne in mind that the power which she wielded over him was derived from the fact that she had become a listener to a certain conversation between himself and Barney the Burker on the night of the grand entertainment that was given in Belgrave Square.

The house was sumptuously furnished; and there was a large establishment of domestics. Mrs. Oxenden appeared determined to do nothing by halves. She herself went to the most fashionable silversmiths, and ordered a costly service of plate; she visited jewellers' and several other shops in a similar manner, and made her purchases as if the wealth of the Indies were at her disposal. Every one of the bills, as they were sent home in rapid succession, she enclosed to the Duke of Marchmont, with a request that they might be immediately liquidated. The Duke purchased for her a very handsome equipage, consisting of a carriage and pair: but Mrs. Oxenden also required saddle horses—for she was a good equestrian, and was proud of displaying her fine figure in a riding-habit. She therefore increased her stud at the Duke of Marchmont's expense; and, in short, she appeared resolved not to deny herself anything that she set her mind upon.

Thus scarcely had a month elapsed since the date which had given the Duke of Marchmont his new mistress, before he found that he was many thousand pounds out of pocket; and that if she went on in the same expensive manner, it would be productive of serious inconveniences, notwithstanding the magnitude of the income which he enjoyed. He had foreseen from the very first that her imperious temper was likely to cause him much annoyance; and a few little examples which she had given him of her domineering disposition, had shown that his presage was by no means ill-founded. He bitterly cursed the unfortunate incident which had rendered him the slave of such a connexion; and he saw the necessity of asserting a will of his own if he would not have that imperious woman put her foot completely upon his neck. Although she was so exceedingly handsome, and possessed a figure of such perfectly modelled and voluptuous beauty,—yet did he take no pleasure in the possession of such a mistress: there was something in her character which filled him with dread whenever he found himself in her presence; and though she was of a temperament which burnt with the strongest fires of sensuous passion, yet was she deficient in those little blandishments and charming fascinations which constitute the real seductive powers of woman.

A magnificent set of diamonds valued at nearly eight thousand guineas, had for some little time been exhibited at the shop of a fashionable jeweller in Bond Street. Numbers of persons belonging to the higher order had been to inspect them; and several offers were made for the purchase of the set: but the jeweller would not abate one shilling of the price which he had originally put upon the gems. Wives had endeavoured to wheedle their husbands, and young ladies their papas, into the purchase of the diamonds—but without effect. Weeks had passed since their first display; and there they remained.

At length, one afternoon, Mrs. Oxenden alighted from her splendid equipage and entered the shop to make a few purchases. She had been on the previous day attracted by something she had seen in the windows; and hence this visit. It was the first time she had patronised the particular establishment in question; and she had not heard of the diamonds that were exhibited for sale in the show-room up-stairs. The shopman who served her—fancying from her own distinguished appearance, and from the brilliant style of her equipage, that she must be a person of some consequence—inquired whether she had seen the diamonds?—and on receiving a response in the negative, he begged that she would condescend to inspect them. To the show-room Mrs. Oxenden accordingly ascended. It was at that hour in the afternoon when fashionable loungers of both sexes are wont to drop in at such establishments, either to while away the time, or to see if there be anything new which may strike their fancies. The show-room on this occasion was more than ordinarily thronged; and the diamonds were the centre of attraction. Several ladies of rank were present with their husbands or fathers; and many a cajoling word was whisperingly spoken from beauteous lips, in the hope that the diamonds would be won as the reward of the honied language. But the sum was too great; and thus the cajoling was useless.

Mrs. Oxenden made her appearance, escorted by the shopman from below. As she entered the room, the glance which she swept around, showed her that Colonel Tressilian was present. This was the officer whose mistress she had formerly been,—the same whom she had encountered at Marchmont House in Belgrave Square, and who had threatened to expose her if she did not retire from the entertainment. *Then* she had felt herself to be in his power: *now* she no longer dreaded exposure—she had accepted the position of a kept mistress—and she was prepared to arm herself with all the false pride and hauteur of a brazen hardihood.

She affected not to perceive Colonel Tressilian; and he was by no means likely to court a recognition on her part; for a young and beautiful wife whom he had married about a year back, was leaning upon his arm. We should observe however that it was by no means generally known that Mrs. Oxenden was the Duke of Marchmont's mistress—although, as a matter of course, there were whispers in certain quarters to that effect.

Colonel and Mrs. Tressilian were amongst a group engaged in the inspection of the much-coveted diamonds; there was however space sufficient to afford Mrs. Oxenden room to take her place at the table in the middle of which they stood beneath a glass globe.

"Are they not beautiful?" she heard Mrs. Tressilian whisper to her husband.

"They are truly magnificent, my dear," responded the Colonel, in the same low tone.

Mrs. Oxenden heard Mrs. Tressilian heave a profound sigh, which was full of longing covetousness, as she continued to gaze upon the diamonds.

"You know, my dear," continued the Colonel, still speaking in a whisper, which he supposed to be audible only to his wife's ear, "nothing would afford me greater pleasure than to purchase those gems for you. I offered a cheque for seven thousand, as you well know—but it was refused; and I am sure you cannot wish me to go any higher?"

"No, certainly not!" rejoined his wife. "But still"—and with another deep sigh she stopped short.

"I see that you are very anxious to have them," proceeded the Colonel: "and it is no wonder! I tell you what I will do, my love: I will offer seven thousand five hundred for them—and I dare say the cheque to that amount will not be refused."

"Oh, how kind and good of you!" answered his wife. "I already consider them to be mine! And to confess the truth, I had so completely set my heart upon them——"

"Now that you tell me this, I cannot possibly suffer you to be disappointed," interjected Colonel Tressilian. "Come—let us go and give the jeweller his own price, whatever it may be."

The eyes of the beautiful Mrs. Tressilian lighted up with ecstatic joy as she accompanied her husband from the show-room,—neither having the remotest suspicion that any portion of their discourse had been overheard. Mrs. Oxenden beheld the door close behind them; and a fiendish expression of triumph flashed in the depths of her large dark orbs.

"These diamonds are truly magnificent," she said to the shopman who had conducted her to the show-room.

"Everybody has admired them, ma'am," he responded; "and many offers have been made."

"What is the price?" inquired Mrs. Oxenden.

"Eight thousand guineas, ma'am," was the shopman's answer; "with a discount of five per cent. for ready money."

"And these are the lowest terms?" said the lady.

"The very lowest, ma'am:"—and the shopman began to look eager; for he perceived that there was a chance of her being a purchaser—but he also feared lest she should slip through his hands.

Mrs. Oxenden examined the diamonds more closely; and all the other personages present looked on with interest—for they likewise thought that a purchaser was found at last. The door opened: Colonel and Mrs. Tressilian reappeared—and at that very instant Mrs. Oxenden said to the shopman, "I will give you your price for the diamonds: they are mine."

"Oh, how unfortunate!" was the involuntary ejaculation which burst from Mrs. Tressilian's lips, and the meaning of which may be explained to the effect that the proprietor of the establishment had just stepped out, but was expected to return in a few minutes, when Colonel Tressilian, in order to gratify his wife, would have been prepared to meet his demand.

All eyes were turned from Mrs. Oxenden towards Mrs. Tressilian, who with the twofold vexation of disappointment, and of having betrayed it, could not prevent the tears from forcing their way. Nothing could exceed the annoyance of Colonel Tressilian himself, when Mrs. Oxenden darted a look of haughty triumph upon him and of contemptuous pity upon his wife. The Colonel grew pale and bit his lips with concentrated rage: then turning suddenly on his heel, he led his wife forth from the room.

Mrs. Oxenden accompanied the shopman to the counting-house,—the proprietor of the establishment having just returned. He was by no means prepared to trust a stranger with such a costly amount of property—nor even to send the diamonds to her house without previous payment. Nor did she choose to expose herself to the humiliation of a refusal on the point. She therefore desired that he would send the bill in an envelope to his Grace the Duke of Marchmont; and she intimated that it would be paid on presentation. The jeweller bowed, and attended the lady forth to her carriage. He now comprehended that she was a Duke's mistress: but it was no concern of his, so long as the bill was paid—of which he entertained not the slightest doubt.

And the bill *was* paid; and the diamonds were sent home to Mrs. Oxenden. But the Duke of Marchmont was astounded at this act of extravagance,—an extravagance which was more wilful and wanton than any whereby he had previously found himself victimised on Mrs. Oxenden's account. Accordingly, on the following day, at about the hour of noon, he proceeded to the residence of his new mistress, with the firm resolution of remonstrating against her conduct. She expected this visit; and she was prepared to give Marchmont such a reception as she deemed most suitable under the circumstances. It was by no means her intention to wheedle nor to cajole him, nor to take the trouble of condescending to blandishments: she had assumed the attitude of an imperious mistress from the very first—a mistress in two senses of the term; and she did not feel inclined to step down from her pedestal. She was apparelled in a dark dress which set off the symmetry of her shape to the fullest advantage of its superb contours; and she felt all a woman's pride in the consciousness of her grand beauty.

The Duke, feeling that circumstances had become exceedingly serious, had summoned all his courage to his aid; and on entering the apartment where Mrs. Oxenden received him, he at once broached the purport of his visit.

"You drew heavily upon me yesterday," he said; "and it was at least very inconsiderate to take such a step without previously consulting me. It might have happened that I had not sufficient in my bankers' hands to meet the cheque which I was at once compelled to draw——"

"And doubtless your bankers would have honoured it all the same," said Mrs. Oxenden, with a species of haughty composure.

"But I would not overdraw them for the world," answered the Duke. "That is not however the precise question. It is whether or not——"

"There is no question at all," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden. "On the night that you and I were so strangely thrown together, you said to me, 'You are poor; I will make you rich: there is nothing you can ask which I will not grant: money in abundance; riches; gold; and gifts.'—These were your promises. Are you fulfilling them when you play the part of a niggard for a few thousand pounds? It is not the first time that you have made a grimace on account of my purchases; and it would seem, therefore, as if we did not have a thorough understanding together at the outset. If not, let us have it now."

"There is moderation in all things," replied the Duke of Marchmont; "and you ought to be reasonable. Frankly speaking, I have not the means to support such marvellous extravagancies as these——"

"And I tell you, my lord," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, her dark eyes now flashing angrily, "that you *do* possess the means, and that you *shall* furnish me with them! You are immensely rich; and I am positively ashamed of you for daring——Yes, I will use the word *daring*—to come and plead pauperism in my presence."

"Mrs. Oxenden," exclaimed the Duke, making a desperate effort to assert his own empire over her imperiousness, "I cannot and will not minister to your boundless extravagancies. If you choose to be reasonable henceforth, we will say nothing more of the past. Two or three thousand a-year will keep you in affluence; and this amount I do not grudge—very far from it!"

"Enough, my lord!" ejaculated the lady; "it is high time for me to speak. Not many weeks have elapsed since a young Hindoo woman was nearly murdered——"

"Why refer to this?" demanded the Duke. "Did you not promise——"

"That the seal of secrecy should remain upon my lips," continued Mrs. Oxenden, "so long as you remained faithful to your own side of the compact. In one word, my lord, you are in my power—and you know it. Recollect, I overheard everything which took place between yourself and the ruffian who was your hired bravo. It was the Lady Indora whose life was aimed at——"

"For God's sake, be quiet!" moaned the wretched Duke of Marchmont, rising from his seat and pacing the room with the most feverish agitation.

"Nay—since we are upon the subject, and you yourself have compelled me thus to refer thereto, it were better that you should hear me out. The Duke of Marchmont must have very potent reasons for desiring to take the life of the Lady Indora; and perhaps her ladyship herself would be thankful were I to give her such information as would prove that it is none other than the said Duke of Marchmont——"

"She knows it! she knows it!" exclaimed the wretched nobleman.

"Well, *she* may know it," proceeded Mrs. Oxenden, rising from her seat, and bending her looks menacingly upon the cowering Duke: "but the tribunal of justice does not know it! *She* may have her reasons for sparing you: *the law* would have none! Oh you are so completely in my power, dare you play the niggard? dare you grudge me these paltry thousands which are a reward so well earned for keeping your secret?"

"Enough! I beseech you to say no more!" exclaimed the Duke. "We shall understand each other better for the future! Pray forget that I remonstrated at all!"

"I am perfectly willing that we should be good friends again," said Mrs. Oxenden, with the patronising air of an imperious mistress bestowing her forgiveness: "but remember, I must hear no more of these remonstrances when I take it into my head to spend a few pounds."

The Duke of Marchmont—finding himself utterly beaten, and that Mrs. Oxenden was resolved to wield her power most despotically over him—thought that the best course he could adopt was to conciliate instead of irritating. He accordingly made all kinds of promises in accordance with the lady's humour; and he took his departure, inwardly anathematising himself for having woven a tangled web of crime which day by day and hour by hour was enmeshing him more and more.

The Duke of Marchmont had not long issued from Mrs. Oxenden's house, when an old gentleman knocked at the front door. When the summons was answered by a footman in gorgeous livery, this old gentleman said, "Is Mrs. Oxenden at home?"

"She is, sir," was the answer. "What name shall I announce?"

"What name?" echoed the old gentleman, nervously. "No matter! Be good enough to introduce me to Mrs. Oxenden's presence. I—I—knew her at Brighton."

The footman had no orders to refuse admittance to any visitor: he of course comprehended that the mistress whom he served, was mistress in another sense to the Duke of Marchmont; and he thought this old gentleman, having known her previously, might possibly have very good reasons for declining to give his name. The lacquey accordingly hesitated no longer to introduce the visitor into the splendidly furnished drawing-room where Mrs. Oxenden was seated.

"Ah, is it you?" she said, quite coolly and collectedly, as if it were a visit of mere ordinary interest. "Pray sit down:"—then, as the door closed behind the domestic, her manner all in an instant changed; and it was even with fierceness that she demanded, "What brings you hither?"

"To assure myself with my own eyes," responded the old gentleman, "that the rumour which reached me is true—that you are living here in gilded infamy——"

Mrs. Oxenden burst out into an ironical laugh.

"Are you come to preach sermons to me?" she exclaimed. "If so, let me assure you at once that I am not prepared to listen to them. Between you and me everything is ended, so far as the ties of husband and wife are concerned. But I did not leave you through any animosity: it was through self-interest. I am enriching myself; and if you like I can put you in a way of enriching yourself. Now do not be a fool, Mr. Oxenden! You must know very well that an old man such as you are——But no matter! I repeat, I have no animosity against you; and therefore I do not wish to say anything to annoy. You can resign me without a sigh; and as you are not overburdened with this world's goods, you will not perhaps lose the opportunity of improving your position. This you may do at the same time that you will be benefitting me——"

"What mean you?" inquired Mr. Oxenden, whose first feelings of bitterness were yielding to others of selfish interest.

"I mean," continued his wife, "that as I have left you, never to return,—you may as well be separated from me legally as you are in fact. In plain terms, I recommend you to bring an action against the Duke of Marchmont for the seduction of your wife—claim heavy damages—I will take care that no defence shall be offered to the process; so that it will be neither a tedious nor a costly one; and all the favour I ask in return is that when the suit is finished you will render it the ground of *another* suit—I mean a suit for a divorce. Come now, Mr. Oxenden, is this to be an understanding between us?"

"Let it be so," answered Mr. Oxenden after a few moments' reflection. "But pray, tell me what object you have in view——"

"No matter!" interrupted the lady: "it is sufficient for you to perform the part which I enjoin: and you will find that it is a lucrative one. Go to a solicitor at once."

"I will, I will!" exclaimed the old man. "Yes, yes—for more reasons than one!"

"What do you mean?" asked his wife contemptuously. "You surely do not pretend that you are really affected by my having left you?"

"We will not discuss that point," rejoined Mr. Oxenden: "suffice it to say that I shall be too happy to carry out your suggestions to the very letter. But as I have no money wherewith to commence this suit—and as I cannot suppose that any solicitor will enter upon it without some guarantee against loss on his own side——"

"Enough!" interrupted Mrs. Oxenden: "you shall have money:"—then as she opened her writing-desk and took forth a number of bank-notes, she laughed, exclaiming, "Is it not singular to use the Duke's own money in bringing an action against himself? Yet so it is! Here, Mr. Oxenden—take these notes. And now depart."

The old man did as he was bidden; and on quitting the house, he bent his way direct to an attorney of whom he had some little previous knowledge.

Mrs. Oxenden, having thus dismissed her husband, retired to her toilet-chamber, to dress for her afternoon's ride in her magnificent carriage. She opened the casket containing the splendid diamonds, and contemplated them with satisfaction and triumph. She had not as yet rung for her maid: she was alone in that dressing-room. It was elegantly appointed: every possible refinement that could be introduced into such a place, was to be observed there. A velvet curtain, with a massive gold fringe, separated it from the bath-room, which was also most luxuriously fitted up. Beyond the bath-room was a little ante-chamber, communicating with the bed-room on one side, and having a private staircase on the other,—this being for the accommodation of the lady's-maid, who could thus in a few moments attend to the summons of the bell without being forced to take the more circuitous route of the principal staircase of the house. Such at least was the original aim of the architect who planned the commodious dwelling; though in the case of Mrs. Oxenden we shall speedily find that the flight of stairs just alluded to served another purpose.

She was in the midst of her contemplation of the diamonds, when her ear caught the sound of a door gently opening and shutting; and a smile appeared upon her countenance. There was a light step traversing the bath-room: the velvet curtain was partially put aside for a moment; and an elegant young gentleman revealed himself to the eyes of the lady. But not unknown to her was he: nor was he an unwelcome intruder there. On the contrary—she at once received him in her arms; and as she caressed him with all the burning enthusiasm of her impassioned temperament, she said, "Dearest, dearest Alexis!"

"You see that I have availed myself of your permission as well as of the key," responded the visitor, as he returned those caresses.

He was perhaps one of the most beautiful youths on whom the eyes of woman ever rested lovingly. He was not above one-and-twenty, and possessed features so delicately chiselled that if he had been dressed up in feminine garb, he might easily have passed as a lovely specimen of the fair sex. His face was altogether beardless: his hair was of a rich brown, and curled naturally: his eyes were of a violet blue—his lips somewhat full, but perfectly well shaped. His figure, which was exceedingly slender, was of the most elegant symmetry: he had a sweet musical voice; and he knew how to modulate its tones to the tenderest language of love. Before continuing the thread of our narrative, we may observe that Alexis Oliver was the youngest son of a country gentleman of some property; and having renounced the profession of the bar for which he was originally intended, he had led an idle and dissipated life as a young man about town. The allowance he received from his family was exceedingly small; and having fallen in with Mrs. Oxenden, he gladly accepted her overtures, and yielded to an amour that so far from costing himself anything, appeared to promise to become the means of filling his purse. In plain terms, so far from Alexis Oliver having to keep his mistress, it was the mistress who proposed to keep him as her paramour. As in complicated machinery there are wheels within wheels, so in respect to this woman there were depravities within depravities; and she who was the wife of one man and the paid mistress of another, became the paying mistress of a third who, as we have said, served as her paramour.

"My dear Alexis," she said, "I have an excellent story to tell you:"—and she at once related how she had purchased the diamonds, thereby revenging herself on Colonel Tressilian, and at the same time giving the Duke of Marchmont another proof of the power which she was despotically resolved to wield over him.

Alexis laughed heartily—not because he really saw anything particularly amusing in the affair, but because he perceived that the lady herself wished to treat it in that agreeable light. The reader now therefore understands that he was one of those despicable creatures who for their own selfish purposes seem to forget the sex to which they belong, and practise towards the depraved women who keep them those cajoleries, wheedlings, and servile coaxings which kept women are usually wont to observe towards those who pension them.

"But are you not afraid," he inquired, "that the Duke will consider you are going a little too far? Or have you succeeded in gaining such a power over him——"

"Yes, dearest Alexis," answered Mrs. Oxenden, "I *have* gained that power over the Duke of Marchmont!"

"It is an immense power," said young Oliver musingly; and the idea stole into his mind that it must have some other source than mere infatuation on the Duke's part. "But how," he inquired, —"how, my sweetest and dearest friend——"

"You must not question me, Alexis, on that point," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden. "I have promised to make you my confidant in most things ——Indeed I love you so much that I feel disposed to give you all my confidence: but there is that one point——"

"Do not think me too curious," said the youth, though his curiosity was in reality piqued and he was resolved sooner or later to gratify it. "You are so handsome it is no wonder you have obtained this power over the Duke of Marchmont. And does he not harbour the slightest suspicion——"

"That I receive visits from you?" exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden. "Oh, no! no! And now I will tell you of a splendid plan which I have set on foot,—a plan, my dear Alexis, that when realized, will enable me to do great things for you. What should you think if you were to behold me a Duchess?"

"A Duchess?" exclaimed the young gentleman, starting with mingled astonishment and delight. "Is it possible you entertain such a hope? But have you forgotten that the Duke of Marchmont is already married?"

"I have not forgotten it," answered Mrs. Oxenden: "on the contrary, it is the principal obstacle—but still it is not invincible. No obstacle is too great for one who has the energy to grapple with it;—and that energy is mine, Alexis—you know that it is mine!"

"But you yourself are married!" cried the young gentleman with increasing bewilderment.

"Listen, Alexis—and I will give you a proof of my confidence. My husband is about to commence a process against the Duke of Marchmont: he will of course succeed—and then he will sue for a divorce from myself. In this also he will succeed; and on the day of his success I become freed from matrimonial trammels. So far so good—is it not?"

"Up to that point indeed," replied Alexis, "the project is admirable. But in respect to the Duke——"

"Listen to me again," proceeded Mrs. Oxenden. "The Duchess of Marchmont is a well-principled lady; and think you not that she would be shocked if she learnt that her husband was maintaining a mistress in a most sumptuous manner?—think you not that she would remonstrate with him—and that when she found that remonstrances failed, she would become indignant—she would feel her own position to be insupportable—she would sue for a divorce? And are there not means of goading her up to that point? are there not such things as anonymous letters, for instance?—and cannot *you*, my Alexis, become my assistant to a certain extent in working out these aims? It is for you to pen the letters which shall make the Duchess of Marchmont aware of her husband's proceedings. Let the very first convey to her the intelligence that he has expended thousands of pounds in purchasing diamonds for his mistress! Let epistle follow upon epistle; and let each one be written in terms which shall wound the pride of the Duchess to an intolerable extent! I repeat, we will goad her to desperation, so that if she have only the ordinary feelings of a woman, she will seek to separate herself from the man who treats her thus. Yes, Alexis, there must be a double divorce; and then—Oh! *then*," added Mrs. Oxenden, with a triumphant expression of countenance, "trust to me to compel—yes, I use the word *compel*—the Duke of Marchmont to conduct me to the altar!"

"These are grand schemes!" said Alexis; "and you know that I will enter into them. Only tell me how I am to act——"

"We will so arrange the details of our proceedings," said Mrs. Oxenden, "that they shall be certain to result in success. I am prepared for all their intricacies: I do not blind myself to the magnitude of the obstacles which I have to encounter. But I possess the requisite energy! Indeed, Alexis, it is a stake worth playing for! And you whom I love so well,—you who have inspired me with a passion such as never before burnt in this heart of mine——"

"Oh, my adored friend!" exclaimed the youth, clasping the infamous woman in his arms: "how rejoiced should I be to hail you as Duchess of Marchmont!"

We need not carry our report of this conversation any further: but before concluding the chapter, we will make a few observations. As already stated, Alexis Oliver was only playing a subtle and treacherous part. He in reality experienced not the slightest attachment towards Mrs. Oxenden: it suited his purpose to become her pensioned paramour—and therefore to flatter her in every sense and to fall into her views. On the other hand Mrs. Oxenden was completely infatuated with him; and the wonted strength of her character was positively absorbed in the weakness of this passion. Blinded thereby, she was ready to give him her completest confidence: she fancied that he was sincere in all he said—that he loved her with the ardour that he professed—and that it was herself, and not her purse, that was the object of his devotion.

CHAPTER CXXXVI.

THE LAWYER'S OFFICE.

The scene shifts to a lawyer's office in Bedford Row, Holborn. The name of Mr. Coleman was upon the door-post; and that he was in a very flourishing way of business, might be judged from the fact that he kept numerous clerks—that the carriages of wealthy clients were often seen stopping at his door—that the tin-cases of his own private room contained deeds of immense value and importance, of which he was the custodian—and that his account at his banker's was always one which rendered him a valuable customer. Mr. Coleman had not as yet reached the prime of life: he was intelligent and active—and he bore an unblemished character.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon that Mr. Redcliffe entered the clerks' office, and inquired if Mr. Coleman were disengaged? By the respectful manner in which the query was answered, and by the alacrity with which one of the clerks hastened to conduct Mr. Redcliffe up-stairs to the lawyer's room, it might be judged that the visitor was a client of no insignificant importance. Mr. Coleman received him with the utmost respect; and when the clerk had retired, the man of business said, "I expected you, Mr. Redcliffe. It is for to-day! And let me hope that the result will be as you have expected—and that the time is not far distant when I shall be enabled to address you by another name."

"Heaven grant that it may be so!" replied Mr. Redcliffe: and then, as an expression of the deepest anxiety, and even of intense anguish, passed over his countenance, he added, "Oh, this species of unnatural warfare which I am waging——it rends my heart!"

"And yet, my lord—Mr. Redcliffe, I mean," said the lawyer, thus suddenly correcting himself, "if the warfare itself be unnatural, it has been by the most unnatural circumstances forced upon you."

"Yes—God knows it was not of my seeking!" rejoined Mr. Redcliffe: "or at least the original causes thereof——But no matter! Let us trust to the issue. Are you confident that Armytage will come?"

"Yes—he is certain," replied Mr. Coleman. "He will come to sue for time:—perhaps he will even ask for farther advances——"

"Think you," inquired Mr. Redcliffe, his countenance assuming an expression that was half gloomy, half sad,—"think you that the web has so completely closed in around him——"

"I am convinced of it!" replied the lawyer. "I have watched his progress day and night, I might almost say—I have fathomed all his proceedings—I have penetrated all the desperate ventures in which he has embarked; and I know that his failure has been signal and complete!"

At this moment the door opened; and a clerk entered, saying, "If you please, sir, Mr. Oxenden wishes to see you."

"Mr. Oxenden?" repeated the lawyer. "Methinks I know the name—and yet I cannot recollect——"

"It is that old gentleman, sir, who lives at Brighton," said the clerk; "and against whom you were once employed by some creditor—when, if you please to recollect, sir, Mrs. Oxenden called—a fine, tall, handsome lady—and she brought a cheque, which she had received from Sir John Steward, to settle the business."

"Ah, I remember!" ejaculated Mr. Coleman. "But I cannot see Mr. Oxenden now—I am engaged——"

"Wait one instant!" cried Mr. Redcliffe, whose interest and curiosity had been awakened by the discourse. "You had better see this Mr. Oxenden: I have reasons which I will explain."

"Then ask him to walk up," said the lawyer, turning to his clerk; "and should Mr. Armytage call, bid him wait—be sure to bid him wait!"

The clerk withdrew; and Mr. Redcliffe said, "With your permission I will retire into the next room—that room where, according to our arrangement, I am to be concealed when Armytage visits you."

"By all means!" said the lawyer: and rising from his seat, he followed Mr. Redcliffe into the adjacent room. "But about this Mr. Oxenden——"

"His wife," interrupted Redcliffe, "is now the mistress of him whose name I can never breathe unless to associate it with some fresh deed of crime or profligacy. My God! alas that it should be so! I know much of these Oxendens—I mean by repute——or rather, I should say, by information which I have received from the lips of Christian, who was at the house of that very Sir John Steward at Ramsgate——"

Here Mr. Redcliffe's observations were cut short by the opening of the door of the adjacent room. Mr. Coleman accordingly left him in his place of concealment, and hastened to receive Mr. Oxenden.

"There are particular circumstances, sir," began Mr. Oxenden, as he took the seat which was offered him, "that render it necessary for me to engage the assistance of some eminent and respectable solicitor. I have no lawyer of my own; and you indeed are the only professional gentleman in London with whom I have any acquaintance. Will you act for me?"

"If you will explain, Mr. Oxenden, the circumstances to which you allude," said Mr. Coleman, "I shall be enabled to give you an answer."

"My wife has been taken from me," resumed the old gentleman: "she has been seduced from my arms by one who is very highly placed! I mean the Duke of Marchmont. I must punish the seducer—and I must procure an eternal separation from the woman who has dishonoured me. This is the reason that I require professional assistance; and whatsoever amount you may demand in advance, I am ready to pay it."

"You mean, Mr. Oxenden," said the lawyer, inquiringly, "that you purpose to bring an action for damages against the Duke of Marchmont—and that if you be successful therein, you will carry the case up to the House of Lords and procure a divorce?"

"That is my meaning—those are my objects," was the reply. "I will never rest until I have punished that villanous seducer of my wife."

"And the evidence which you have to bring forward?" asked Mr. Coleman.

"What evidence can be better than that the depraved woman is living under the protection of the Duke of Marchmont? He has taken a house for her—he has supplied her with equipages—with horses and servants—he visits her frequently——"

"If all this can be proved, it is sufficient," interrupted Mr. Coleman. "I will make notes of the information you now give me—I will institute inquiries—and if you will favour me with another call in a day or two, I shall be better enabled to give you my opinion upon the case."

Mr. Oxenden accordingly took his departure; and immediately afterwards Mr. Armytage was announced. Though Zoe's father was not above fifty-two years of age, yet he looked older; for care and anxiety had traced upon his countenance the marks of their ravages. His hair was completely grey: there were deep lines upon his forehead; and that expression of cold worldly-minded calculation which his features had been wont to wear, had become subdued—or we should perhaps say had changed into one of settled wretchedness. He entered the office with the mingled nervousness and humility of a man who was very far from being in a condition to pay a large sum of money—but rather with the demeanour of one who, as Mr. Coleman had expected, came to sue for grace, leniency, and forbearance. The lawyer did not, however suffer his countenance to betray that he thus anticipated what Armytage's financial position might really be: but with all civility he motioned him to a seat; and then resuming his own place at the desk, began untying the red tape which held together a number of deeds.

"Well, Mr. Armytage," said Coleman, "I presume from your punctuality that you are here to settle the business according to agreement. And it is very fortunate, inasmuch as my client——"

"Your client wants the money?" said Armytage, with feverish excitement. "Then it *is* a client who has advanced it? It is not yourself?"

"I indeed!" ejaculated Mr. Coleman. "I can assure you that the legal profession now-a-days is not quite so flourishing as to enable one who practises it, to advance fifty thousand pounds——"

"Good heavens! what am I to do?" moaned the wretched Armytage, clasping his hands in despair.

"Am I to understand," inquired Mr. Coleman, "that you have come unprepared with a cheque for this amount—an amount which you so solemnly undertook to pay, and for which you gave me this warrant of attorney, exercising full power over your person as well as your property——"

"Good God! you would not take my person? you would not plunge me into a gaol?" cried Armytage, looking as if frensy had suddenly seized upon him.

"I have already informed you," responded Mr. Coleman, "that it is not my money which you have had; it is that of a client. I am not therefore acting for myself—but for another; and I must obey the instructions which that other has given me."

"But you can make a farther advance? or *he* can make another advance?" said Armytage, gasping as it were with the awfullest feelings of suspense. "If you do not, it is ruin!—utter and complete ruin for me——aye, and not only ruin for myself—but likewise for others! And I who have such opportunities! There is at this moment a project which, if entered into, would be certain to realize hundreds and thousands. Oh, you must—you must afford me this opportunity of getting back my lost fortune—of redeeming my past adversities! Oh, dear kind sir! I beseech, I beseech you to aid me!"

There was a wild horror in the look and manner of Armytage—a species of frenzied terror lest a negative response should issue from the attorney's lips. His countenance was ghastly pale: he leant forward as he sat,—his gaze fixed with a sort of devouring avidity upon Coleman's countenance. The solicitor, who was a humane man, felt his heart touched by the spectacle; and Redcliffe, who was in the next room, was likewise moved as he listened to the tone of anguished entreaty in which the wretched being spoke. But still neither would yield upon the subject: the course which was being adopted arose from a paramount necessity.

"I tell you, sir," continued Armytage, "that it is not merely ruin for one—it is ruin for more! My daughter—my beloved daughter—the amiable and accomplished Zoe, for whom I have toiled so hard—for whose sake I strove to heap up riches,—*she* too will be ruined!—*she* will be reduced to penury itself,—she who has never known what it is to want! And then her husband—my son-in-law—Lord Octavian——Oh, what a dreadful blow for him! No, no! it is impossible!—you could not do me so much injury! You would not——you are a man of feeling——"

"Mr. Armytage," inquired Coleman, "how much money do you possess?"

"Not a hundred pounds in the whole world!" almost shrieked forth the wretched man. "I ought to have made hundreds of thousands! I ought to be rich! Oh, I ought to have amassed treasures! But a hideous fatality has hung over me—everything has gone wrong! I throw myself upon your mercy!"

"Mr. Armytage," said Coleman, rising from his seat, and leaning against the mantel with a certain resoluteness of air, "you borrowed this money for a stated time—the instructions of my client are positive—and however much I may deplore the necessity of using harshness, yet circumstances leave me no alternative."

"And what—what would you do?" asked the miserable man, bending forward in his chair, and looking up with an expression of haggard, ghastly appeal into the lawyer's countenance.

"Mr. Armytage," responded Coleman, "I have already told you that my client's instructions are of the most positive character. And when I tell you that it is no secret to us that you are otherwise indebted—that you have raised twenty thousand pounds by means of bills——"

"Yes—bills!" gasped Armytage: and more hideously haggard, if possible, became his countenance. "Those bills—those bills! Ruin—disgrace—infamy!" he muttered to himself, with a certain vacancy, as if reason were abandoning him.

"And these bills," continued Mr. Coleman, "have all fallen into my hands—or rather the hands of that same client to whom you were already so largely indebted."

"But they are not as yet due!" cried Armytage.

"No: but they will be due in a few days," rejoined Coleman; "and how will you pay them? Upwards of seventy thousand pounds do you now owe to this client of mine; and you have admitted your almost total want of resources. Permit me to ask one question. I believe you possess the friendship of the Duke of Marchmont. Think you that he will come forward with so large a sum to extricate you from your difficulties?"

"What if he were to advance a part?" ejaculated Armytage eagerly. "Say twenty thousand? I dare not beseech him for more!"

"So far as my client is concerned," responded Coleman, "he insists upon being paid everything to the uttermost farthing. Or else——"

"Or else what?" said Armytage quickly. "Oh, have mercy! Think of my poor daughter! She has been ill—she has been in France for her health——and, Oh! if she were to see her father in prison, it would kill her! I beseech you to have mercy."

"Mr. Armytage," resumed the lawyer, "there is the warrant of attorney; and if you fulfil not your engagement, it must be immediately acted upon. Unfortunately in these circumstances all private feelings are lost sight of: my duty towards my client prevents me from paying that regard to this appeal which you make on your daughter's behalf——"

"But who is this client of your's?" exclaimed Armytage, driven almost to despair. "Surely he cannot be so hard a man?—surely he cannot wish to plunge three of his fellow-creatures into a ruin for which there will be no redemption? Give me time, even if you will not assist me with a further loan! But to put the bailiffs into my house—to seize upon my person——Oh, the disgrace! And then, when the news reach my poor Zoe——"

"You would make very great sacrifices, Mr. Armytage," said the lawyer, "in order to avoid this catastrophe?"

"Sacrifice!" ejaculated Armytage. "Tell me what sacrifice you demand? Tell me what I can do——"

"There *is* something, Mr. Armytage," said Coleman,—"yes, there is something—but you little suspect to what I allude——yet there is something, I repeat——"

"My God! keep me not in suspense!" cried the miserable creature imploringly: "but tell me, *is* there a means of saving myself?"

"There is a means," answered the lawyer: "it is the only alternative to save you from a debtor's prison. I will even go farther; and wild though my words may seem, yet they are nevertheless fraught with truth. The warrant of attorney, and the bills which are coming due, may all be torn up before your face and tossed into the fire: the lost fortune of your daughter may be replaced—and ruin may be averted from yourself——if—if," repeated Coleman, with a solemnly significant look,—"if you——"

"Oh, for heaven's sake speak!" cried Armytage, now almost wild with mingled joy and suspense. "To avert the blow from Zoe——"

He stopped suddenly short; and overpowered by his feelings, burst into tears.

"Yes," continued Mr. Coleman, after a brief pause, during which those tears flowed freely from the eyes of Armytage,—"you can save yourself! But I tell you that the sacrifice you may have to make is immense, inasmuch as it involves the complete unbosoming of every secret which your heart has harboured."

"What mean you?" gasped he to whom these words were addressed.

"I am speaking intelligibly," proceeded the lawyer. "Look down into the depths of your soul, and see if there be nothing there which you have hitherto locked up in the profoundest cavern where the most stupendous secrets could possibly be retained. Choose whether you will have that mighty secret dragged into the light of day—or whether you will dare a debtor's prison?"

"I do not understand you," said Armytage—and yet it was with a look and in a tone which conveyed the impression that he was as it were appalled by the manner in which he had just been addressed.

"I will now deal more frankly with you," proceeded Mr. Coleman. "The whole tenour of my connexion with you from the very first instant that I sought you out, has had one object in view—and only one object! I knew that you were in difficulties; and therefore it was not in a blind confidence that I advanced you my client's money. No—it was to get you into our power; and for *this* reason did I likewise find out where you had bills circulating—for *this* reason was money given for those bills, that they might get into our hands and paralyse you all the more completely when the day of reckoning should come. The web has enmeshed you—it has closed in around you; and there is but one means for your emancipation. Everything depends now upon yourself. I offer to annihilate your debts by the destruction of bonds and documents; I offer likewise on my client's part to restore your daughter's fortune with which you have made away; and more than that, I will guarantee to yourself a certain sum of money—a reasonable sum, to the amount of a few thousand pounds,—so that if you consider you have positively and veritably a chance of redeeming your broken fortunes, the opportunity will be afforded you. On the other hand the fullest and completest revelation in respect to certain past incidents whereof I have no doubt that you possess a knowledge,—*this* is the condition on which alone so much will be done for you. Need I speak more plainly? Your countenance," added Coleman impressively, "proves beyond a matter of doubt that you labour not under the slightest uncertainty as to the meaning of my words."

"But is this a delusion? am I under the influence of a waking dream? dare I believe the language which meets my ears?"—and Armytage, pressing his hands to his throbbing brows, appeared to feel as if this would steady his reeling brain.

"You may believe everything you hear," responded Mr. Coleman: "have I not already told you that all has been a matter of calculation? You remember that I sought you out—I forced money upon you—it was not you who first addressed yourself to me——"

"True! true!" ejaculated Armytage: then suddenly starting up, he fixed his eyes keenly upon the lawyer, saying, "But if I were to tell you everything, would any harm redound upon my own head?"

"I can scarcely think, Mr. Armytage," replied Mr. Coleman, "that you yourself have a crime wherewith you have to reproach your conscience ——unless it be the concealment of your knowledge of another's crime: but that is comparatively venial."

Armytage reflected: a powerful struggle was evidently taking place within his breast; and turning again towards the lawyer, he said, "It is true I could make a revelation: but to what use would it be turned?"

"You must not question me too far," answered Coleman: then assuming a solemn air, he added in a corresponding tone, "The day is near at hand, Mr. Armytage, when the justice of heaven will assert itself, and when all mysteries shall be cleared up. Think you that if I were not in possession of a certain clue I should be speaking as I am now addressing you? Think you that so much trouble would have been taken and so much money ventured, if there were not in the first instance a degree of certainty as to the result which was to be produced? Look at your position! The abyss of ruin yawns to receive you—whereas on the other hand you may be restored to the enjoyment of affluence, and all your adversity may be turned into prosperity!"

"My debts will be forgiven me?" said Armytage: "my daughter's money which I have lost, will be restored to me——"

"All!—everything!" replied Mr. Coleman. "And now——"

At this moment the door was thrown open; and a clerk announced, "The Duke of Marchmont."

The lawyer started; and an expression of mingled wonderment and annoyance passed over his countenance. He was astonished that this nobleman should have so suddenly made his appearance at such a crisis; and he was vexed because he fancied that his interview with Armytage might now take a turn different from that which he had anticipated. Armytage himself likewise started: he became exceedingly agitated: he looked first at Mr. Coleman and then at the Duke, as if hardly knowing whether to think that the appearance of his Grace was an unexpected or pre-arranged event. But his uncertainty on this point was speedily dispelled on observing the look of surprise with which the Duke of Marchmont regarded him.

"What, Armytage! you here?" exclaimed the Duke. "Ah! by the bye, now I recollect, you have pecuniary affairs with Mr. Coleman? I hope they are progressing satisfactorily?—Mr. Coleman, perhaps I ought to beg your pardon for this intrusion: your clerk told me that you had some one with you—but the instant I gave him my card, he expressed his conviction you would see me without delay."

"Yes, my lord," said the attorney, "I will attend to your Grace at once. Mr. Armytage, have the kindness to step into another room. My clerk will show you thither. We will finish our business presently."

The clerk, who had lingered at the door, led Mr. Armytage across the landing to another room; and the Duke of Marchmont remained alone with the solicitor—at least so far alone as they could be said to be, considering that Mr. Redcliffe was in an adjoining apartment and in a position to overhear everything that took place. Mr. Coleman requested the Duke of Marchmont to be seated: and then said, "May I beg to be informed of the business which has procured me the honour of your Grace's visit?"

There was a certain degree of coldness and reserve in Coleman's manner which could not be otherwise than perceptible to one who, by his rank and position, might naturally have awaited nothing but the profoundest respect from the man of business. But not appearing to notice the somewhat glacial distance of the lawyer's demeanour, the Duke said, "I do not think, Mr. Coleman, that I shall take up your time many minutes; for I have only a simple question to put—and doubtless your answer will be as concisely given."

"Proceed, my lord," said the solicitor: and as he seated himself at his desk, he awaited with cold and grave attention whatsoever was to follow.

"It has come to my knowledge," continued the Duke of Marchmont, "that you have made inquiries concerning a certain Madame Angelique three or four times lately; and to tell you the truth, she is somewhat alarmed. Now, I need not inform you, Mr. Coleman, that some of us mortals are frail enough—and I will frankly admit that I, being one of these fallible ones, frequented the establishment which Madame Angelique used to keep. Happening to call upon her to-day—just to see how she was getting on in the villa to which she has retired—I found her overwhelmed with alarm——"

"I can assure your Grace," answered Mr. Coleman, "I have recently made no inquiries relative to Madame Angelique. There was a period when I certainly intended to prosecute her for keeping a house of infamy: but when she abandoned that iniquitous profession and retired to some suburb of the metropolis——"

"I understand, Mr. Coleman!" ejaculated the Duke: "you were satisfied? the establishment was broken up, and that was all which you required? Then I must have been deceived: or rather Madame Angelique herself has been misled upon the point. But she certainly labours under the apprehension that you still have your eye upon her; and what is more, that you entertain the intention of renewing hostile proceedings. Now, between you and me, Mr. Coleman, if this be really the case, I should be very happy to do anything I can for Madame Angelique—not merely for old acquaintance' sake——"

"My lord," interrupted the attorney coolly, "pardon me for expressing my surprise at the circumstance of such phrases of sympathy and friendship dropping from your lips in reference to such a woman."

"I know very well," responded the Duke, drawing himself up haughtily for a moment, "that it may appear strange to any one who is exceedingly particular. But," he added, instantaneously unbending and assuming an urbane demeanour once more; "I hope you will treat the matter as between men of the world. You can very well understand that if any proceedings were instituted against Madame Angelique, she might possibly give publicity to the names of some of her principal patrons; and as this would seriously affect the reputation of many individuals highly placed, I venture to express a hope that for their sake——"

"One word is sufficient, my lord," interrupted Mr. Coleman; "and I hesitate not to declare that the topic is fraught with infinite disgust for me. I am at present taking no legal proceedings against Madame Angelique: but let me tell your Grace, that if I were doing so, the chance of involving all the titled names in the kingdom would have no weight with me!"

"Setting aside the species of reproof conveyed in your words," said Marchmont for an instant biting his lip, "and which may be more consistent with morality than courtesy, I thank you for the assurance you have given me. I wish you good afternoon, Mr. Coleman:"—and the Duke was walking towards the door, when, as if suddenly struck by a recollection, he ejaculated, "Ah! by the bye, what about Armytage? I know him well: he is a worthy man—but foolishly speculative; and he has always got his brain full of ideas about making a fortune. I hope that his affairs——"

"My lord," interrupted Coleman, with a glacial reserve, "I never speak to one person unnecessarily of the affairs of another——"

Again the Duke of Marchmont bit his lip: he hesitated, and lingered as if about to say something more: but thinking better of it, he bowed with a haughty coldness and quitted the room. The opposite door on the landing was half open; and Armytage, appearing upon the threshold, said in an agitated manner, "My lord, one word with you, if you please?"

It was precisely this meeting which Mr. Coleman was anxious to prevent; and he had accordingly followed the Duke forth upon the landing. He heard that hastily expressed desire on the part of Armytage; and he stopped short, uncertain how to act.

"Eh? a word with me?" exclaimed the Duke, affecting an easy, off-hand, indifferent manner, as he perceived that Mr. Coleman was immediately behind him. "Where can we converse?"

"I have no doubt," replied Armytage, "that Mr. Coleman will permit us the use of this room for a few instants——"

"Certainly," said the lawyer: for he felt that it would be most churlish—as it indeed would have been, to all outward appearance—for him to refuse so simple a request.

He accordingly bowed, and returned to his own private office: while the Duke of Marchmont entered that room on the threshold of which Mr. Armytage had made his appearance.

"What is the matter, Travers——Armytage, I mean?" demanded the Duke, closing the door after him. "You look pale—agitated—ill: something has excited you terribly! But I suppose I can guess what it is? All those grand schemes of your's, of which you spoke to me, and in which so much of the money I lent you has been locked up——"

"My lord, listen!" interrupted Armytage: "for it is indeed most serious!"

"This is what I feared," said the Duke, with an air of such bitter vexation that it almost amounted to anguish. "You are again pressed for money: but I hope, in heaven's name, you do not expect any more at my hands!—for what with an extravagant mistress, and such drains as you have lately made upon my purse, Travers, it would ruin the greatest fortune!"

These last words were not exactly uttered with an intention of being overheard by Armytage; but were rather spoken in a musing manner to the Duke's ownself—while he took rapid and short walks to and fro in the room. Nevertheless, Zoe's father *did* hear those words: but he seemed to take little heed of them.

"My lord," he resumed, "it is indeed most serious—and I beseech you to listen to me! Do not interrupt—every instant of delay is only fraught with additional anguish towards myself, and with additional suspense for your Grace; because what I have to say, regards your lordship as much as it does me."

"Travers!" ejaculated Marchmont, darting a peculiarly piercing look upon the speculator.

"Three times has your lordship addressed me by that name within the last five minutes," rejoined Armytage; "and let me tell you that it is ominous! For besides ourselves, it would seem as if there is some one else beneath this roof who knows that I once bore that name."

"And what of that?" asked the Duke quickly, but at the same time with an expression of fear in his looks which was in contradiction with the seeming hardihood of his words. "There are several persons in the world who know that you once bore that name. But there is no harm——"

"Ah, my lord! why do you not listen?" exclaimed Armytage impatiently. "You yourself see that there *is* some harm pending: and yet do you thus endeavour to stave off the instant when you must hear the truth. Listen, I say, my lord! You see before you a man who is placed in the most difficult and painful of positions. I am ruined—fifty thousand pounds do I owe this lawyer—or, more properly speaking, his client; twenty thousand pounds of bills which I have put in circulation —— and, my God, *such* bills!—will be due in a few days: these are also in this lawyer's hands——Zoe's fortune made away with——"

"Well, well!" ejaculated the Duke, now evidently fevered with the intensest and most painful curiosity. "But how does all this——"

"How does it regard your Grace?" exclaimed Armytage bitterly.

"In a direct manner, I mean?" interjected Marchmont. "Of course through friendship for you——"

"My lord, if you would but listen!" exclaimed Armytage, with renewed impatience. "I have shown you how on the one side I stand upon the very verge of ruin: I may now tell you how on the other I have received offers of a most astounding—a most incredible nature——and yet all true, all true! I may be rich once more: I may be released from these fearful liabilities—the fortune of my daughter, which I have dissipated, may be replaced—and in addition to all this, a large sum may be at my disposal,—all on *one* condition—yes, *one* condition, my lord——"

"And that condition?" ejaculated Marchmont, smitten with the conviction that all to which he was listening must indeed more or less regard himself.

"Your Grace may believe me or not, as you think fit," resumed Armytage: "but I swear unto you that no syllable suggestive of aught to your prejudice went forth from my lips: no word savouring of betrayal, did I utter. No, by heaven: not a syllable—not a word! And yet the proposition was made—a proposition to the effect that if I would only reveal something——Need I, my lord, say more?"

"In the name of God," gasped the Duke, white as a sheet, and staggering as if stricken a blow, "what—what——"

But he could not complete the sentence: he could not complete the query which he endeavoured to frame with his ashy quivering lips.

"For years has your Grace's secret been kept," resumed Armytage; "and for countless reasons would I most sincerely desire to keep it inviolate unto the end! But the temptation to betray it is immense! With me everything is now at stake: circumstances render me intensely selfish; and it is for your Grace to decide whether I am to owe the resuscitation of my fortunes to yourself, or to that lawyer in the other room?"

Armytage had spoken with a mingled nervousness and resoluteness; and the Duke of Marchment, sinking upon a chair, gasped for breath. His eyes stared wildly: his countenance became fearful to look upon in its indescribable ghastliness. The punishment of pandemonium was gnawing at the heart within—rending the soul with ineffable excruciations, and reflecting its direst agonies upon the features themselves.

"Travers," said the Duke, in a low hollow voice, as he rose from his seat and approached Armytage, "you could not do this!"

"My lord," was the response, "I repeat that I have grown intensely selfish: I can now think of no one but of myself and of my daughter. Seventy thousand pounds do I owe to this lawyer—or rather to his client; and, Oh, my lord! you know not how absolutely necessary it is that the bills which form a portion of that debt should be taken up before they are due!"

"But, my God, Travers!" asked the Duke, with the most feverish and frightful suspense, "what has this Coleman been saying to you? What does he know? what does he suspect? There must have been some clue——"

"My lord," replied Armytage, "I swear that I know nothing as to the origin of all that has ere now taken place. I myself was astounded! Think you that I would have wilfully dropped a word——"

"No, no, Travers!" exclaimed Marchmont.

"Pray cease from calling me by that name! It sounds ominous, my lord—I tell you that it sounds ominous! The raven does not croak forth its own doom——"

"Enough, Armytage!" interrupted Marchmont: "our very language is taking a tone which is indescribably horrible! But tell me—tell me—I adjure you, tell me—nay, I command you," continued the Duke, almost maddened with the hideous thoughts that were agitating in his brain, so that he scarcely knew what he said: "is not all this some device on your part—some understanding with that lawyer for the purpose of drawing me into the settlement of your debts? Oh! if it be, I will forgive you—I will forgive you—I will come forward to assist you! Only relieve my mind—tell me that nothing really is known—that nothing is suspected,—tell me this, I entreat you, Armytage—give me that assurance, my dear friend—and I will pardon the little device—I will attribute it to the desperation of your circumstances——Oh! set my mind at ease, I entreat and implore!"

"My lord," responded Armytage, "I am *not* deceiving you! It is utter folly on your part to blind yourself to the perils which environ you, and to seek to take refuge in an idea which your own good sense tells you is unfounded."

The Duke was however catching at any straw which floated past; and like all men in desperate circumstances, he was endeavouring to reason against his own convictions. No pen can describe the degree of wretchedness which he experienced—the forlorn desolate state of abject misery to which his mind was reduced. Ghastly as his countenance was, it was still a tablet as imperfect to reflect all that was blighting, searing, scathing, and scorching his heart within, as language itself is powerless to convey the extent of that deep internal agony.

"For heaven's sake make haste, my lord! How is it to be?" exclaimed Armytage. "You know the worst—and it is for you to decide. Desperate as my own circumstances are, it is to me but a matter of indifference from which quarter help may come—whether from yourself or from that attorney in the other room. There is however one thing which you should bear in mind. It is quite evident that whatsoever Mr. Coleman may suspect, he is very far from having any certitude upon the point: it is clear that he must be utterly without proofs—or else he would not be prepared on behalf of his client to make such tremendous sacrifices in order to elicit revelations from my lips."

"True!" ejaculated the Duke of Marchmont, clutching with a species of feverish joy at this hope. "But that client—who is he?"

"I know not, my lord," rejoined Armytage: "his name has never been mentioned to me; nor to my knowledge have I ever seen him. But no matter! If the lawyer remain in ignorance, the client must be equally ignorant——"

"And you, Armytage," said the Duke,—"will *you* maintain the seal of secrecy upon your lips if I make this enormous sacrifice on your behalf?"

"For how many years, my lord, have I already kept that secret?" asked the speculator: "and think you it is a secret which I should willingly reveal? Think you, in a word, it would please me to proclaim to the world that I have so long rendered myself an accomplice, as it were—yes, an accomplice by my very silence——"

"Enough, Armytage!" ejaculated the Duke of Marchmont. "I will do all that is needful. Whatsoever they propose——"

"The items may soon be summed up," said Armytage. "Seventy thousand pounds to be paid to this lawyer—Zoe's lost fortune of sixty thousand to be replaced—that makes a hundred and thirty thousand. Then say twenty thousand for myself——"

"A hundred and fifty thousand pounds!" exclaimed the Duke: "the sacrifice is immense! Nevertheless, it shall be accomplished. Let us compose ourselves—let us calm our feelings, if possible!"

Marchmont sat down, rested his elbows on his knees, and buried his face in his hands. He was exerting all his power to tranquillise his mind sufficiently to meet the lawyer and terminate the business. Armytage had far less difficulty in composing his own countenance: for there was now joy in his heart—he was to be rescued from all his embarrassments, and without the dreaded alternative of having to make any revelation whatsoever.

"Now let us rejoin the lawyer," said the Duke of Marchmont, at length rising from his seat: but as he withdrew his hands from his countenance, Armytage perceived that the traces of a recent convulsing agony remained thereupon.

They issued forth together from the room; and Armytage tapped at the door of Mr. Coleman's private apartment opposite. This gentleman at once opened that door; and the two passed in.

"Mr. Coleman," said the Duke of Marchmont, with an almost preterhuman exertion to maintain his composure, "my friend Mr. Armytage has consulted me in respect to his affairs: he has enumerated all his liabilities—and I feel inclined to assist him. Of course you yourself will rejoice that the matter is to be thus terminated in a way which will restore your client all the money he has advanced."

"Mr. Armytage is of course the best judge of his own affairs, my lord," replied Mr. Coleman, with a true professional coldness and gravity, though inwardly he was supremely annoyed at the turn that circumstances were thus taking.

"I believe, Mr. Coleman," proceeded the Duke of Marchmont, "that your own demand upon Mr. Armytage is some seventy thousand pounds: but if you will give me the precise amount, I will at once write you a cheque, and you can hand over to Mr. Armytage the securities which you hold."

The lawyer was of course utterly unable to offer any objection to this proceeding; and adding up the amounts, together with the interest and expenses, he passed the paper specifying the total to the Duke of Marchmont. His Grace glanced quickly at the sum; and painfully anxious to have the business terminated, he took a slip of paper to write the cheque. While he was thus engaged, a clerk entered and handed a letter to Mr. Coleman. Neither the Duke nor Armytage imagined for a moment that this letter had any reference to the present proceedings; and as the former continued to write, the latter went on revolving the ideas that were in his mind. The cheque was completed; and then Armytage, stooping over Marchmont's shoulder, whispered in his ear, "At the same time your Grace must give me the draft for the eighty thousand that remains to be paid; so that everything may be now settled at once."

"And why not presently, or to-morrow?" asked the Duke, likewise speaking in a whisper, but hurriedly and even angrily.

"Because, I repeat, everything must be settled at once," returned Armytage with a resolute air. "The alternatives are before you: you have chosen your own course——"

"Well, be it so," interrupted the Duke: and taking another slip of paper, he began to write the second cheque.

Meanwhile Mr. Coleman had read the letter which the clerk had placed in his hand; and a gleam of satisfaction mingled with the expression of astonishment which appeared upon his countenance. The Duke and Armytage were too much absorbed by what was then taking place between them, to notice the effect produced on the attorney by the letter he had received: and he himself for a few instants appeared irresolute how to act. That indecision was however of only transient duration; and suddenly laying his hand upon the shoulder of Armytage, the lawyer exclaimed, "Stop! the matter cannot be settled thus!"

"What," cried the Duke of Marchmont, springing up in terror to his feet; "what mean you?"

"I mean," responded Mr. Coleman, fixing his eyes upon Armytage, although answering the question put to him by the Duke,—"I mean that the bills which I hold in my possession, are forgeries—and you, Mr. Armytage, have been guilty of a felon's crime!"

It was a cry of anguish which rang from the lips of Armytage—at the same time that an ejaculation of dismay burst from the Duke of Marchmont, as the frightful conviction flashed to his mind that the ruined speculator was now completely in the power of the attorney and his unknown client.

At the same moment hasty footsteps were heard ascending the stairs: the door was burst open—and three other persons appeared upon the scene.

CHAPTER CXXXVII.

THE TREACHEROUS HINDOO WOMAN.

WHEN last we spoke of the ayah Sagoonah, it was to describe her lying in her couch at Queen Indora's villa, and making unconscious revelations respecting the past. During the night of the day which followed, a gleam of intelligence came back into Sagoonah's mind: it faded away—presently it returned—it subsided again—and then it came back with increasing power. She was altogether recovering her consciousness.

Long before morning dawned on that night of which we are speaking, Sagoonah was in complete possession of her mental faculties; and though she uttered not a word, she was now aware of her position and of the frightful calamity which had befallen her. Collecting her ideas, she settled them upon that memorable evening when disguised in the apparel of her mistress, and laden also with the treasure plundered from the Queen, she had intended to escape from the villa, but only to be stricken down by an assassin's dagger!

By the bedside she perceived an elderly woman whom she had no difficulty in recognising as a nurse; and presently the Queen herself entered the chamber. Sagoonah closed her eyes; and appeared to be sleeping profoundly. The nurse quitted the room for some purpose: Indora bent over the ayah; and entertaining not the slightest suspicion that the treacherous Hindoo was now in possession of her reasoning faculties, her Majesty gave audible expression to the thoughts that were uppermost in her mind.

"O Sagoonah, Sagoonah!" she murmured; "how could you have been so wicked—you whom I loved and trusted?"

No change upon the ayah's countenance denoted that she heard or comprehended what was thus being said; and Indora, wiping away the tears which had trickled down her cheeks, retired to an ottoman at a little distance from the couch; and seating herself there, she fell into a profound reverie. Shortly afterwards Christina Ashton entered the chamber; and having bent over the ayah, whom she believed to be still steeped in unconsciousness, she gazed on her countenance for a few moments. Then, heaving a profound sigh, Christina turned towards the Queen; and said in a half-hushed voice, "Think you, dear lady, that Sagoonah will ever recover?"

"Yes — she will recover," responded Indora; "she is evidently much better. This much I can tell by her countenance. But perhaps, my dear Christina, it were better for her own sake that she should *never* recover!—for if she have any good feeling left, the remainder of her life must be spent amidst the agonies of remorse."

"Oh, yes, dear lady!" continued Christina; "so much wickedness is incomprehensible! There was such refinement in it that one is almost justified in fancying that the spirit of a fiend must have inspired her for the time! The snake——O heavens! I shudder when I think of it!"

"And well may you shudder, dear Christina," rejoined the Queen; "for it was terrible! Even while the reason of that wretched girl had lost its guiding power, yet was conscience at work, and in her dreams did she make those revelations which have conveyed to our knowledge all the wickedness of her conduct. But she will recover, Christina——"

"And it is you, lady," answered our heroine, "who will have saved the life of her who sought to take your own!"

"Yes—she will recover," continued the Queen, in a musing manner, yet speaking audibly; "and she will have leisure for repentance, if her heart be susceptible thereof!"

"Have you decided, dear lady," asked Christina, "upon the course which you intend hereafter to adopt with regard to her?"

"You know, Christina," replied Indora, "that it is my hope and expectation to be in a short time enabled to return to my kingdom; and if no fresh circumstances transpire to alter my plan, I shall take Sagoonah with me. But never again can I give her my confidence—much less restore her the love which, all menial though she were, I was wont to bear towards her! The remainder of her life must be passed in strictest seclusion at Inderabad. If she be truly penitent she will not grow impatient of that compulsory retirement to which it is my purpose to consign her: but if, on the other hand, her soul shall continue to cherish rancorous thoughts, it will be all the more necessary that she should be deprived of the power of doing mischief."

"Oh! let us hope that she will be penitent!" said Christina; "let us hope it, chiefly for her own sake!"

Here the conversation terminated: but not one single syllable thereof had been lost to Sagoonah. She now comprehended that all her iniquity was known; and that even the most terrific episode of her criminal proceedings—namely, that of the cobra di capello—had ceased to be a mystery. She saw too that an eternal imprisonment in her own native land was to be her doom—unless indeed she herself should be enabled to frustrate the designs of the Queen. But that this imprisonment was intended to be associated with the most lenient circumstances, Sagoonah comprehended, not merely from the way in which her Majesty spoke, but likewise from her knowledge of that royal lady's disposition. Nevertheless, the thought of such compulsory seclusion was sufficient to fill the soul of the ayah with dread and consternation.

We have seen how conscience had been actively at work when reason's governing power was absent; but now that the intellect had recovered its balance, and that the mental faculties had resumed their empire once again, the evil passions of the ayah enabled her to stifle all those reproaches of the monitor within her bosom. Her crimes were known; and never again could she look her mistress in the face! Besides, to become a prisoner for the rest of her days—this was intolerable! And to know that Indora would enjoy happiness in the love of Clement Redcliffe—this likewise was more than the jealous Sagoonah could possibly make up her mind to contemplate! She loathed the very idea of the kindness which she must have been experiencing at the Queen's hands since the evening when the dagger of the assassin struck her down;—and thus her soul was in every sense filled with gall and bitterness. Penitence and remorse!—*these* were incompatible with such a disposition as Sagoonah's!

Her mind was made up how to act. At present she felt herself too weak and feeble to move from her couch: but she was resolved to take the earliest opportunity, not merely to escape from the villa, but likewise to carry out all her original plans of vengeance. In the meanwhile it was necessary to dissemble. She must give no sign of consciousness—or else she would be questioned by the Queen: perhaps she would be reproached?—at all events it suited her purpose in every way to simulate a prolonged unconsciousness of everything that was passing around her.

Thus several days elapsed; and during this period Sagoonah so well played her part, that no one who entered her chamber entertained the remotest suspicion how vividly the light of reason had flamed up again. It was as if a lamp were burning within a tomb which the unsuspicious passer-by conceived to be inwardly plunged into obscurity. Sagoonah felt her strength rapidly increasing; and she soon saw that the moment was approaching when she must put into execution her project of escape. The medical attendant declared that physically she was past all danger; but he expressed to the Queen and Christina his apprehension that her reason was gone for ever—this being the only hypothesis to account for that seeming absence of consciousness which the wily and treacherous Sagoonah so effectually simulated. And she heard the observations which were thus made by the side of her couch; and never once did a muscle of her face move suspiciously—never once did a rush of blood to her cheeks betray her knowledge of what was thus passing around her. Surgeon, Queen, Christina, nurse,—all were deceived!—all imagined that Sagoonah remained in utter ignorance of her position! They knew not that within that apparently unconscious form the darkest passions were agitating—the deepest designs were being formed—and the vitality of the intellect had sprung up with an unimpaired power.

Days passed, as we have said, since her return to consciousness; and Sagoonah was now watching an opportunity of escape. It failed not to present itself. One morning after breakfast, when both the Queen and Christina were in the Hindoo woman's chamber, the following brief dialogue took place.

"It is my purpose, dear Christina," said the Queen, "to pay the promised visit this forenoon to Miss Isabella Vincent. You know that I assured your brother I would take the earliest opportunity to form that young lady's acquaintance; and indeed, I begin to feel the want of a little change of air and temporary recreation, no matter how brief!"

"It is exceedingly kind of you, dear lady," answered Christina, "to think of one in whom my brother is so much interested; and I am rejoiced that you are about to seek some little recreation. I will remain with Sagoonah during your ladyship's absence. Not for a single moment will I leave the chamber, nor abandon her to the sole care of the nurse."

"It is not so necessary, my dear Christina," replied the Queen, "to be as particular now as we were wont to be in the first instance. There can be no doubt that Sagoonah's reason is gone—and it may be for ever! On this point the medical attendant has spoken most positively; and I cannot but concur with his opinion. Perhaps in one sense it is fortunate for her that she should have lost the memory of the misdeeds which she has committed; though in another sense it may be ununfortunate,—for if this state of mental torpor should continue, she will have no opportunity to repent of her sins. But as I was observing, it is no longer needful, my dear Christina, to watch so continuously over her. Provided you will every now and then visit the chamber during my absence, it is sufficient. Indeed, I was thinking that if during the two or three hours I may be away from the villa you would do me a little service——"

"Anything, dear lady!" exclaimed Christina, who was always ready to testify her grateful devotion to her at whose hands she had received so many benefits.

"It is one of the little services," continued the Queen, "which Sagoonah herself was wont to perform—I mean the arrangement of my jewel caskets. They require frequent supervision, and likewise to be touched by a delicate hand; so that it is to none of the domestics that I can entrust the duty."

"It shall be performed to the best of my ability," responded Christina: "and I hope to your ladyship's satisfaction."

This dialogue, as we have said, took place in Sagoonah's chamber,—the Queen and her young friend being utterly unsuspicious that every syllable was perfectly comprehended by the ayah. The nurse was absent at the moment: but she speedily made her appearance; and while Indora took her departure in the carriage to pay the intended visit to Miss Vincent, Christina repaired to her Majesty's boudoir to commence the task of inspecting and arranging the gems and jewels of inestimable price which belonged to her royal benefactress.

Sagoonah now felt that her opportunity was at hand. There she lay, to all appearance in a profound torpor,—the elderly nurse entertaining no notion to the contrary. It has been said that there are certain reptiles which simulate death in order the more easily to secure their intended victims; and thus was it that the treacherous Hindoo woman, like one of the most designing and deadly serpents of her own native clime, was affecting complete inanimation of the intellect, though all the while endowed with the fullest mental vitality.

The elderly nurse busied herself in putting the chamber in order; and then, hearing the clock proclaim the hour of midday, she knew it was the time to procure the refreshment which she was wont to administer to her patient. It was her custom to leave the room only when the Queen or Christina should be present: but on this occasion she happened to deviate from her rule—and thus all the more completely favoured the projects of the ayah. Indora was absent—Christina was engaged—Sagoonah seemed wrapped up in mental torpor: the nurse saw not the slightest harm in descending to the kitchen to procure what she required. The ayah waited a few minutes to see whether anybody would come: but the nurse sent no one to take her place temporarily—and Sagoonah was not long ere she availed herself of the opportunity. She descended from the couch: she opened the door and listened: there was no one on the staircase or the landing. She knew—or at least conceived to the best of her knowledge, that Christina was in the Queen's boudoir: and it was towards Christina's chamber that she sped. A dress, a shawl, a bonnet, and other needful articles of the toilet, were quickly taken possession of; and Sagoonah glided back to her own room, having succeeded in escaping all observation. She thrust the articles of apparel into a cupboard, and lay down in the bed again. Scarcely had she thus resumed her place on the couch, when the door opened, and the nurse made her appearance.

The woman suspected not what had been done in her absence; and while she was administering food to Sagoonah—who received it with the vacant docility of an infant—Miss Ashton entered. Believing that all went well, Christina soon retired, and returned to Indora's boudoir, where she resumed her occupation with the jewels. Meanwhile Sagoonah was nerving herself for the final effort to escape; and now came the most difficult and perilous part of her pre-arranged plan.

The nurse was seated by the side of the couch, with her attention deeply absorbed in a volume of a novel. Her back was partially turned towards Sagoonah, so that she might all the more conveniently catch upon the page the light from the windows. All of a sudden the sheet was thrown over the nurse's head—it was drawn tight across her mouth—and Sagoonah's voice, speaking with unmistakable power and plainness, cried, "Dare to shriek forth, and I will strangle you?"

The nurse, overwhelmed with terror, sank down in a swoon; and the ayah, springing from the bed, convinced herself that the woman was indeed plunged into a state of unconsciousness. She suffered her to lie where she had fallen; and the sheet being taken off her, Sagoonah kept her eyes rivetted upon the nurse's countenance, so that she might be prepared for the first indication of her awakening. With all possible speed did Sagoonah apparel herself in the garments she had taken from Christina's room; and the nurse gave no sign of life while the ayah was thus performing her toilet.

It was with an exulting heart that Sagoonah found circumstances to be progressing thus favourably: but still there were risks to be incurred. At any moment Christina might enter the chamber; or she might encounter that young lady upon the stairs. Nevertheless, Sagoonah was prepared for everything, rather than renounce the plan which had thus far progressed so satisfactorily. The old nurse was just beginning to give signs of returning consciousness, when Sagoonah opened the door—listened for an instant—and then hurried forth. It was a garden-bonnet, with a blue gauze veil, which she had taken from Christina's room; and she drew that veil over her countenance. Gliding down the stairs, she reached the hall just as a female-servant was entering it from the further extremity. Sagoonah sped to the front door with a degree of haste which somewhat astonished the domestic, who took her to be Miss Ashton. In a moment however the disguised Hindoo woman disappeared from the servant's view; and the front door closed behind her.

Sagoonah was now free. She hastened through the garden—she reached the gate—she sped along the lane towards the main road. She looked back: no one was in pursuit:—more elated grew her heart—her feelings were indeed now at the highest pitch of exultation!

Sagoonah hastened onward. She dared not enter a vehicle, for she had no money in her pocket; and she had lived long enough in England to have a full knowledge of the indispensable character of that article in its application to nearly all the circumstances of life. But she had not proceeded far before she encountered a police-officer; and to him she addressed herself.

Meanwhile her flight was discovered at the villa. The female-servant who had seen her pass through the hall, and had taken her for Miss Ashton, naturally conceived from the precipitation of her egress that something serious was occurring, and that the invalid ayah was perhaps much worse, so that Christina had hurried off to fetch the medical attendant. The servant ascended the stairs, to see if she could render the nurse any assistance: but on entering the sick chamber, she was stricken with dismay on finding that Sagoonah was gone and that the nurse lay gasping upon the carpet. The servant rang the bell instantly for assistance, while she began to administer restoratives to the nurse; and the first person who answered the pealing of that bell, was Christina herself. Explanations were speedily given; and a rapid search made in Christina's own chamber, cleared up the mystery. Some of her apparel had disappeared: the ayah had evidently fled!

The faithful Mark—the Queen's major-domo—sped in pursuit: but it was too late—Sagoonah was nowhere to be found. Christina was at first almost frantic, blaming herself for not having exercised sufficient vigilance during the Queen's absence. She likewise began to reproach the nurse for what she naturally conceived to be her treacherous complicity in the flight; because Miss Ashton could not conjecture that Sagoonah herself had procured the apparel which served as the disguise for her departure. The nurse however protested her innocence, and explained what had occurred, so far as the sudden attack upon herself was concerned. The condition in which she was found by the female servant, corroborated her tale; and Christina, now convinced that the swoon was no simulated one, regretted the reproaches she had addressed to the poor woman. The nurse admitted having left Sagoonah alone for about ten minutes; and thus the manner in which the apparel might have been procured, seemed to be fully explained. That the ayah had been practising some stupendous hypocrisy was also apparent; for that she could have so suddenly regained her senses and adopted such energetic proceedings without deliberation and forethought, was not to be supposed. Mark, on his return from his ineffectual pursuit, was despatched by Christina with the intelligence to Queen Indora at Isabella Vincent's mansion; and her Majesty returned in all haste to the villa. Thence she despatched a note to Mr. Redcliffe at his lodgings in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square.

Let us now return to Sagoonah, whom we left at the moment she was accosting the first police-officer whom she encountered after her flight from the villa.

"You are a constable?" she said; "and it is your duty, I believe, to assist the law and further the cause of justice?"

The officer replied in the affirmative: but he was not a little astonished at the mode in which he was thus addressed—especially as through the blue gauze he caught a glimpse of a countenance which, though with a dusky complexion, was nevertheless of extraordinary beauty.

"I have some information to give respecting a great offender," proceeded Sagoonah: "but I have learnt and read enough of your English customs to be aware that I must address myself to a magistrate. Will you conduct me to one?"

For a moment the suspicion flitted through the officer's brain that it was rather to a lunatic-asylum than into the presence of a magistrate that the ayah ought to be conducted: but still there was something sufficiently collected in her speech to stagger him.

"What is this information that you have to give?" he inquired.

"I will only tell it to a functionary competent to act upon it," was Sagoonah's response; "and therefore if you will not at once take me to a magistrate, I must address myself to some other person."

"Come with me, if you please," said the officer: and he conducted her to the nearest station-house.

There Sagoonah repeated to the Inspector what she had said to the police-constable; and the Inspector, taking her into a private room, questioned her more closely. Without telling him everything, she nevertheless said sufficient to induce him to proceed farther in the matter; and ordering a cab to be summoned, he escorted the ayah to the police-office in Bow Street. There he introduced her to the magistrate, who gave her an audience in his private room. She now no longer hesitated to tell all she knew; and both the Magistrate and

Inspector were astonished at the information which they thus received. The account was in all respects so lucid—the details were so minute—the occurrence to which they referred, was so well known, although dating many years back—and the explanations given by the Hindoo woman so accurately filled up a certain gap which had hitherto existed in respect to the sequel of that history, that the magistrate felt himself bound to act upon what he had heard.

Leaving Sagoonah at the police-office for a brief space, we must direct the reader's attention to Mrs. Macaulay's house in Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square. That worthy lady was seated in her comfortable little parlour, at about three o'clock in the afternoon; and she was refreshing herself with the remnants of a couple of chickens left from the dinner provided for Mr. Redcliffe and Christian Ashton on the preceding day. Mr. Redcliffe had gone off in one direction, Christian in another,—the former to visit Mr. Coleman, as already described—the latter to call upon Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley, who were staying in London. Mrs. Macaulay was altogether happy: she had nothing to trouble her—for she had now no lodgers on the second floor to vex her with their meanness, inasmuch as Mr. Redcliffe had for some weeks past occupied as much of the house as she was accustomed to let out: indeed this had been the case ever since Christian came to take up his abode with that gentleman. Mrs. Macaulay had therefore not merely a handsome rental coming in weekly; but she and her two domestics fared sumptuously every day on the remnants of the repasts served up to her lodgers. What more could a landlady wish for? She could afford to look with a sort of disdain on the ordinary lodging-house-keepers in the same street; and as for Mrs. Sifkin, the worthy Mrs. Macaulay experienced an ample revenge for all the wrongs sustained at the hands of that woman, by means of the envy and jealousy with which the latter now notoriously regarded her.

Mrs. Macaulay, as we have said, was feasting off the cold chicken left from Mr. Redcliffe's table—flavoured with a slice of the ham that Mr. Redcliffe had for his breakfast—and washed down by two or three glasses of sherry which, being at the bottom of one of Mr. Redcliffe's decanters, could not possibly be either wanted or missed by that gentleman! Presently there came a knock at the door—a good loud commanding double knock; and when the parlour-maid had answered the summons, Mrs. Macaulay heard a masculine voice inquire, "Is Mr. Redcliffe at home?"

"No, sir—he is not," replied the servant-girl.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the visitor; "I am very sorry for that—I wish to see him most particularly! When do you think he will return?"

"I'm sure, sir, I don't know," was the servant's response: "but his dinner is ordered for half-past five as usual. Perhaps however missus knows when he will come in."

Mrs. Macaulay made her appearance in the passage at this stage of the conversation; and she perceived that the visitor was a tall stout man, with bushy whiskers—and if not of very elegant appearance, still far from vulgar.

"Is it very important, sir?" she inquired: for she was always mightily curious to glean whatsoever she could of Mr. Redcliffe's proceedings or affairs.

"Well, it is important," answered the visitor. "I have just arrived from India, and have got a letter for Mr. Redcliffe. I should like to deliver it into his own hands. You know perhaps, ma'am, that Mr. Redcliffe was a considerable time in India?"

"I have heard so," answered Mrs. Macaulay "Well, if it is so very important, I think I can tell you where to find Mr. Redcliffe; for he had a cab fetched when he left about half-past two o'clock —and though I wasn't purposely listening——for I should scorn the action——I nevertheless heard him tell the driver to take him to his solicitor's, Number —, Bedford Row, Holborn."

"I am exceedingly obliged," said the visitor; and away he went.

Now this individual was none other than the Inspector of Police of whom we have so recently spoken, and who had disguised himself in plain clothes in order to procure the information that he needed. He returned at once to Bow Street, and took another constable, as well as Sagoonah herself, with him in a cab. They proceeded to Bedford Row; and the Inspector, still wearing his plain clothes, bade the constable recline back so that his uniform might not be seen. The Inspector himself alighted, and entered alone into the clerks' office. His inquiry was promptly made; and the answer was as promptly given:—Mr. Redcliffe was there, and was engaged at the time in Mr. Coleman's private office up-stairs.

The Inspector stepped out into the street, and quickly returned, accompanied, by the officer and Sagoonah. The presence of the latter was not needed for the purpose of immediately identifying the one who was to be captured: but she had insisted upon seeing out the matter to the very end. She was so fearful that her victim would escape; and moreover, all her love being turned to burning hatred, she longed to gloat over his downfall!

The clerks in the ground-floor office were astonished and dismayed at beholding a constable in the society of the individual in plain clothes who had made the inquiry relative to Mr. Redcliffe: but he speedily announced himself to be an officer of justice; and he warned those present to beware how they raised any alarm which might defeat the purpose that had brought him thither.

In the room up-stairs Mr. Coleman had just pronounced the bills given by Armytage to be forgeries: the Duke of Marchmont was thrown into consternation—the wretched forger himself was smitten with unspeakable horror,—when the door burst open, and the Inspector made his appearance, followed by Sagoonah and the constable.

The ayah had thrown up her veil—the Duke of Marchmont at once recognised her—and his guilty conscience smote him with the idea that she had come with the officers of justice to arrest him as the instigator of the assassin-deed which being intended against her royal mistress, had stricken herself. Armytage, at the sight of a constables uniform, gave vent to a hollow moan at the thought that he was the object of so ominous a visit. Mr. Coleman was seized with astonishment, and perhaps also with misgivings in respect to the motive of the sinister presence.

The Inspector glanced around upon the lawyer, the Duke, and Mr. Armytage; and when he laid not his hand upon either, nor ordered the constable in uniform to take any one into custody. Marchmont and Armytage began to breathe more freely: but Mr. Coleman's misgivings increased.

"There is an inner room," said the Inspector, advancing towards the door of the apartment in which Mr. Redcliffe was all this while concealed.

"It is private!" exclaimed Mr. Coleman, placing his back against it.

"Private, or not private," said the Inspector resolutely, "I must do my duty. Come, sir—have the goodness to stand aside, or I shall be compelled to use force."

"Beware how you violate the privacy of my offices!" exclaimed Mr. Coleman: but the agitation and distress which he displayed, more than ever convinced the police officials that he whom they sought was in the adjacent room.

The Inspecter was just upon the point of laying his hand upon the lawyer for the purpose of removing him by force, when the handle of the door was turned from within, and a voice exclaimed, "Resist them not, my friend! I surrender!"

It was with a low gasping moan that Mr. Coleman stood away from the door: it opened—and Mr. Redcliffe came forth. The Duke of Marchmont gave such a start, and such an indescribable expression swept over his countenanee, that frightful indeed must have been the feelings which were tearing like vultures at his heart; while Armytage gave utterance to a cry of amazement. As for Sagoonah—while lightnings shot forth from her eyes, she drew her lithe bayadera form, clad in Christina's garment, up to its full height; and her duskily handsome countenance assumed a look of fiendish satisfaction. But it appeared as if Clement Redcliffe beheld not either of the three whom we have just named: his countenance wore a marble composure—his form was erect—his step was firm as he issued from the inner room; and there was not the slightest agitation of his lip nor vibration of his dark eyes to denote any feeling of uneasiness within.

"Officer, do your duty!" he said, in a firm but glacial voice.

"I arrest you, my lord," replied the Inspector, "on a charge of murder. You are Lord Clandon by title—better known as the Hon. Bertram Vivian."

"I am he," responded the prisoner. "Coleman, you will accompany me. Spare your handcuffs, sir!" he added, turning in a dignified manner towards the police-constable who had just produced the manacles. "It is not my purpose to offer the slightest resistance."

The constable was overawed by the manner in which he was thus addressed; and, at a glance from the Inspector, he replaced the handcuffs in his pocket.

Lord Clandon—as we must now call Mr. Redcliffe, *alias* Bertram Vivian—walked forth from the room without bestowing the slightest notice upon either the Duke of Marchmont, Armytage, or Sagoonah; and descending the stairs, he entered the cab, accompanied by the Inspector and the police-constable. Mr. Coleman intimated that he would follow immediately. Sagoonah likewise descended the stairs; and the Inspector said to her, "You must come on to the police-office: we shall require your presence there."

The ayah accordingly took another cab, and repaired to Bow Street.

Mr. Coleman remained behind for a few minutes with the Duke of Marchmont and Mr. Armytage. The lawyer's countenance was exceedingly pale, but no longer agitated: it was firm and resolute. Armytage appeared utterly overwhelmed, crushed, and spirit-broken with everything that had taken place: the Duke of Marchmont was evidently labouring under the almost stupefying sense of a horrible consternation. His countenance was ghastly; and he gazed upon Mr. Coleman as if this gentleman were the arbiter of his doom.

"My lord," said the solicitor, addressing himself with a cold sternness to the Duke, "the event which has just occurred renders it unnecessary for your Grace to remain another moment here. Upon that event I shall offer no observation——"

"But—but," said the Duke, in almost a dying tone, "you will take this cheque—you will settle this business for Mr. Armytage——"

"No, my lord!" interrupted Coleman. "I decline your Grace's intervention altogether. Mr. Armytage will remain with me, to talk over these matters. At his peril will he disobey me!"

"But, Mr. Coleman," gasped forth the Duke, with a desperate but vain effort to assume an air of composure, "as Mr. Armytage's friend you will at least suffer me to speak to him in private."

"Not another syllable, my lord!" exclaimed Coleman resolutely. "And now I insist that your Grace immediately leaves my office."

Armytage—with his elbows resting upon the table—had buried his face in his hands; and he was moaning lamentably—while the words, "Oh, my poor dear Zoe!" escaped twice or thrice from his lips.

The Duke of Marchmont lingered with the air of a man whose desperate circumstances impelled him to make one more effort to save himself from the utter destruction which he saw to be imminent: but when he looked at the sternly resolute countenance of the lawyer, he was compelled to admit the conviction that everything was indeed hopeless in that quarter. He accordingly issued from the room, reeling and staggering as if under the influence of wine.

Mr. Coleman suffered a minute or two to elapse, in order to give the Duke time for departure; and he then summoned one of his clerks from below.

"Mr. Price," he said, in a hurried whisper to this clerk, "you will follow the Duke of Marchmont—you will watch him day and night—you will dog him whithersoever he goes—and if he attempts to leave the country, you will at once give him into custody——"

The clerk started with astonishment; and it was a perfect consternation that seized upon him when Coleman whispered a few more words in his ears. The lawyer placed a sum of money in the clerk's hand for whatsoever expenses might be incurred in the mission now entrusted to him; and he whisperingly said, "Be cautious—be silent! I know that I can rely upon you!"

"You may, sir:"—and the clerk issued from the room.

Another of the dependants was now summoned from the lower office; and when he made his appearance, Coleman said, "Mr. Ingram, you will remain here with Mr. Armytage till my return.

Let no one have access to him; and if he should endeavour to escape, call in a police-constable and give him into custody on a charge of forgery."

Armytage had all this while remained with his countenance buried in his hands: but when he heard that mandate given by Mr. Coleman to the clerk, he threw himself at the lawyer's feet, imploring his mercy.

"Everything depends upon yourself," replied Coleman; "and you can now more than ever understand how your testimony will become so needful."

Having thus spoken, the lawyer issued from his office—descended the stairs—and engaging a cab, which happened to be passing along Bedford Row, he proceeded to Bow Street.

Before concluding this chapter, we have one explanation to give. The reader will recollect that Mr. Coleman had received a letter upon the perusal of which he had taxed Armytage with forgery. This letter was from another solicitor, who had first of all discounted the bills for twenty thousand pounds that have been so frequently mentioned. Those bills, as we have seen, had fallen into Coleman's hands: for with the aid of Mr. Redcliffe's money he had taken them from the original discounter. This discounter had that very day happened to discover that the acceptance of some mercantile firm had been forged by Armytage to those bills; and he had accordingly written to communicate the fact to Mr. Coleman. This was the letter which, as we have seen, was received by Coleman a few minutes previous to the sudden bursting in of Sagoonah and the police-officials.

CHAPTER CXXXVIII.

THE PRISONER IN THE DOCK.

THE magistrate at Bow Street had not quitted the office, although it was now past the usual hour for his retirement from the bench: but he awaited the result of the expedition on which the Inspector had set out. It was not very long before this official returned, accompanied by his prisoner. The crowd that usually hangs about a police-office, had dispersed in the belief that the business of the day was over: the newspaper-reporters had likewise taken their departure; and the court itself remained empty until the magistrate and his clerk were fetched from their private room by the intimation that the prisoner who was expected, had just arrived at the office. The magistrate accordingly returned to take his seat upon the bench: the clerk placed himself at the table; and Lord Clandon was now escorted into the dock. In addition to the persons already noticed, there were only Sagoonah, the Inspector, and the constable, besides two or three other police-officers, now present. But Mr. Coleman speedily made his appearance; and soon afterwards another individual entered the court.

This last-mentioned person was Mark, Queen Indora's faithful major-domo. It will be recollected that her Majesty had despatched a note to Mortimer Street, acquainting Lord Clandon with Sagoonah's flight; and of this note Mark was the bearer. On reaching Mortimer Street, he had learnt from Mrs. Macaulay—as the disguised Inspector had previously done—that Mr. Redcliffe (as he was *then* called) had gone to his solicitor's in Bedford Row, Holborn. Thither Mark proceeded, little suspecting the fearful nature of the intelligence that awaited him. His astonishment and consternation may therefore be imagined, when he learnt from one of the clerks that Mr. Redcliffe had been arrested on a charge of murder, and that he was none other than the Duke of Marchmont's brother, Lord Clandon. Of this fact Mark was hitherto completely ignorant; and it filled him with as much surprise as the incident of the arrest excited his grief. He sped away to Bow-street: and as we have seen, arrived there shortly after the proceedings had commenced.

To prevent any confusion, while the reader refers to some of the earlier chapters of our narrative, it may be as well to remark that during the life-time of the Duke of Marchmont, Hugh (the present Duke) bore the title of Lord Clandon, while his brother was simply the Hon. Bertram Vivian. But when the murder of the old Duke gave the higher title to Hugh, Bertram as a necessary consequence became Lord Clandon; and it is thus that we shall speak of him.

On being introduced into the dock, Lord Clandon lost not for an instant that self-possession, calmly though coldly dignified, which at the moment of his arrest he had worn at Mr. Coleman's office. He bowed to the magistrate: when his solicitor entered he bestowed on him a look of friendly recognition; and when he saw Mark make his appearance in the Court, he beckoned him to the side of the dock, and bending over, whispered, "You will break this intelligence as delicately as possible to your mistress. But wait until you hear everything that takes place!"

Sagoonah had been conducted by the Police-Inspector to a seat just behind the witness-box; and she now looked straight forward, not once turning her eyes after the first glance towards the victim whom her vindictive jealousy had consigned to that ignominious position. She beheld Mark make his appearance; but she affected not to perceive him. Her features were rigid: and dusky though her complexion was, yet a visible paleness, cold and death-like, sat upon her countenance.

The Inspector entered the witness-box, and was sworn. He then addressed the magistrate as follows:—

"Your worship is aware that about nineteen years ago the Duke of Marchmont of that day was found murdered at a short distance from Oaklands, his country-seat in Hampshire. A Coroner's Inquest pronounced a verdict of 'Wilful Murder' against Bertram Vivian, otherwise Lord Clandon. Warrants were issued for the apprehension of the accused: a reward was offered by the Secretary of State for his apprehension; advertisements were inserted in the newspapers—but all without effect. The accused had taken his departure; and during this interval of nineteen years, nothing ever reached the ear of justice concerning him until this day. From information which I received, I have now arrested the prisoner in the dock; and I charge him with being that same Bertram Vivian, otherwise Lord Clandon, against whom a verdict of 'Wilful Murder' was returned by a Coroner's Inquest in the year 1829."

The clerk of the court then addressed the magistrate:—

"By your worship's instructions, in consequence of the information given this afternoon, I repaired to the Home Office, to which the depositions taken at the Coroner's Inquest in the year 1829, had been forwarded. I have obtained those depositions; and I have them here."

"As the case occurred so long ago," said the magistrate, "it will be necessary to read them."

"Perhaps it would save your worship's time," said the prisoner, "if I were to admit that which it is by no means my purpose to deny, and which I have already admitted at Mr. Coleman's office: namely, that I am indeed that same——"

But here Mr. Coleman rose; and making a sign to the prisoner to be silent; he said to the magistrate, "I should much prefer that your worship would adopt the course you were about to take, as I have my reasons why the whole incidents of the bygone tragedy should be again brought fully to the knowledge of the public. A generation has well nigh passed since the date referred to; and as my client will plead *Not Guilty* to the dread crime imputed to him, I am anxious that, with the true British spirit of fair play, public opinion may be suspended until a jury of the noble prisoner's countrymen shall have pronounced their verdict."

The clerk of the court accordingly read the depositions. They commenced by setting forth how Purvis the butler, and Leachley the valet, had found the body of the late Duke by the side of the pond, with the dagger sticking in its back. Then followed the evidence of the present Duke of Marchmont, as it was given at the time, and which chiefly went to prove that the dagger was the property of his brother Bertram; and that on the evening preceding the night of the murder, he had left his brother at an inn in the neighbouring village, in a terrible state of excitement in consequence of certain matters connected with the Duchess Eliza. It then appeared from the depositions that the landlord of the village inn was next examined as a witness. He deposed to the fact of Bertram having passed about three hours at the tavern in the afternoon and evening of the day preceding the night of the murder—that he was violently excited the whole time—and that he had rushed away in the frenzied state of which his brother had spoken. It next appeared from the depositions that two of the housemaids belonging to Oaklands were examined in succession; and their statement was to the effect that while arranging the chamber occupied by Bertram during his stay at the mansion, they had seen the dagger lying amongst a few other curiosities, which, as they understood, Bertram had brought with him from the United States. The man-servant who had specially attended upon Bertram during his visit, appeared to have been the next witness; and he was represented as having deposed to the fact that Bertram had shown him the dagger, explaining at the same time that it had been long in the possession of some celebrated Indian Chief who died a few months previous to Bertram's departure from Washington. The dagger was described in the depositions and by the witnesses as being of very peculiar workmanship, and once seen, could not possibly have been mistaken.

The depositions proceeded to show that witnesses were next examined to relate the particulars in respect to the dog. It had been found that Pluto was mortally wounded by a pistol-bullet: but the weapon itself had not been found, either in the pond or in the neighbourhood—so that it was tolerably evident the assassin had taken it away with him. The cloth which the dog had brought in his mouth, was a fragment evidently torn from the skirt of a surtout coat; and it was therefore supposed that the faithful animal had flown at the murderer of his master—in doing which he had received the fatal bullet. It was farther shown at the Coroner's Inquest that Bertram had on a black surtout coat when he left Oaklands after the scene with the Duke and Eliza. The depositions went on to state that the evidence being complete, the Coroner proceeded to sum up. In alluding to the circumstance of the dagger, he said "that it had been incontestibly proved that the weapon belonged to Bertram; and that the Jury, with this fact before them, would have to weigh well whether, under all the circumstances, it was Bertram's hand which committed the deed—or whether some other person had obtained possession of that dagger with the foulest of purposes." The Coroner had remarked "that it was certainly extraordinary that Bertram should have had the dagger about him at the time when he was walking with the Duchess and when the incident occurred that compelled him to fly from Oaklands. None of the witnesses had been able to throw any light upon that point,—such for instance as proving that the dagger was still in Bertram's room at the time of his flight—or on the other hand, that they missed it from the room. Certain it was the dagger had dealt the murderous blow; and it was for the Jury to say whether the hand of Bertram or that of an unknown assassin had wielded the weapon." Having commented upon all other parts of the evidence, the Coroner had left the matter in the hands of the Jury.

The depositions concluded by stating that a verdict of "Wilful Murder" was returned against Bertram Vivian, *alias* Lord Clandon.

When the clerk of the court had finished reading these depositions, the Inspector said, "I now propose, your worship, to introduce a witness who will prove that the prisoner in the dock, so long known by the name of Clement Redcliffe, is in reality the Bertram Vivian, *alias* Lord Clandon, against whom that verdict was returned; and I conceive that your worship will hold this evidence sufficient to remand the prisoner, if not finally to commit him for trial."

Lord Clandon—understanding that Sagoonah was the witness alluded to—was again about to address the magistrate, to admit his identity, so that the ayah's evidence might be dispensed with: for with a generous delicacy he was anxious to prevent Queen Indora's name from being brought forward in the present proceedings. But Mr. Coleman, advancing towards the dock, whispered to the prisoner in the following manner:—

"Your lordship must really suffer the proceedings to take their course. As there will inevitably be a trial—and I hope to God it will only be for form's sake!—but still as a trial *must* ensue, it is requisite we should glean every particular. Queen Indora's name must sooner or later be mentioned in the proceedings; and therefore as well to-day at this court, as in another place a short time hence. I beseech that your lordship will leave yourself entirely in my hands."

"My friend, I will do so," answered Lord Clandon: and the solicitor retired to his seat.

The Inspector now directed Sagoonah to enter the witness-box; and she was first of all questioned by the magistrate in respect to her knowledge of the obligations of an oath. Her answers were satisfactory; and she was sworn according to her own creed. Then—partly in reply to leading questions put by the Inspector and the magistrate, and partly of her own accord—she proceeded with her evidence. She spoke the English tongue sufficiently well to render it entirely intelligible; and it was rather with a peculiarity of accent than in broken phrases that she delivered her testimony. Her veil being raised, the extraordinary beauty of her countenance could not fail to strike those present to whom she was a stranger: her demeanour was coldly calm and collected; and her voice trembled not. But once—and once only—did she glance towards the prisoner in the dock; and this occasion will be mentioned in its place.

She deposed that her name was Sagoonah—that she was about twenty-six years of age—that she had been left an orphan in her childhood—from which time she had been brought up about the person of Indora, Princess, and now Queen of Inderabad, an independent kingdom of Hindostan. She recollected that about sixteen years back, and consequently when she was only ten years old, an Englishman bearing the name of Clement Redcliffe arrived at the Court of Inderabad. He was in the East India Company's service, and came to that Court as an accredited diplomatic agent on the part of the Governor-General. The King of Inderabad, for his own reasons, detained the Englishman at his Court, and caused a rumour of his death in the jungles to be propagated in other parts of India, so that it might reach the ears of the British functionaries at Calcutta. Sagoonah proceeded to state that the Englishman was treated with all possible distinction at the Court of Inderabad—his freedom alone excepted. He had sumptuous apartments assigned him in a pavilion attached to the Royal palace; he had slaves to minister unto him—a guard of honour to attend him; and riches were showered upon him. Those around him were expressly ordered by the King to address with the respect due to a noble of the highest rank. He was the preceptor of the Princess Indora, whom he instructed in all European accomplishments, and whom he converted to Christianity. He was likewise the King's Privy Councillor, and was the means of introducing a multiplicity of reforms into the institutions of the country. All these were of the most liberal tendency; and thus, although he was known to be an Englishman and a Christian, he was an universal favourite with every grade of society in the kingdom of Inderabad. He was always addressed as if he himself were a Prince; and it was generally believed that he would espouse the Princess Indora, and become monarch of the country whenever the old king should die.

It must be observed that Sagoonah related these facts in order to give her narrative as much precision as possible; but that likewise much of the information she imparted, was elicited from her by questions, while the rest was spontaneously afforded from her lips.

She proceeded to depose that the Englishman Clement Redcliffe frequently implored his freedom, but could not obtain it. Thus years passed on. At length, in the year 1845, an incident occurred which made Sagoonah acquainted with some portion of his former history. It appeared that an English traveller was found murdered in a wood in the neighbourhood of the capital; and amongst the documents discovered on his person, was a London newspaper. This newspaper fell into the hands of the Englishman Clement Redcliffe. On that very same day Sagoonah was walking in the Court of Fountains belonging to the palace of Inderabad,—when she was the unseen witness of a meeting on the part of the Englishman and the Princess Indora. The Englishman threw himself at the feet of her Highness, imploring that she would intercede with her royal father to procure his freedom. He said that everything which regarded his native country had hitherto been a perfect blank to him; but that the newspaper which had now fallen into his hands, contained a paragraph bearing allusion to his own family, and to his horror tending to criminate him in respect to a murder which he never even knew had been committed at all. He mentioned the name of the Duke of Marchmont: he mentioned his own real name of Bertram Vivian. His language was passionate and vehement; and she (Sagoonah) thought he scarcely knew what he was saying at the time. Sagoonah continued to depose that she herself, during this interview remained concealed behind a group of shrubs, and that her presence there was not suspected by either the Englishman or the Princess. She never told either what she had overheard, but treasured it up in her own bosom. The Englishman's freedom was not accorded him; but some time afterwards he escaped from Inderabad. Then the Princess determined upon coming to England; and Sagoonah agreed to be her companion. Since they were in England—and very recently—Sagoonah had listened at the door when the prisoner and Indora were conversing together; and she had heard enough to establish the conviction in her mind that he whom she had so long known by the name of Clement Redcliffe was none other than Bertram Vivian—or, more properly, Lord Clandon.

"And the prisoner in the dock," said the magistrate, inquiringly, "is the same person of whom you are speaking?"

Now it was that Sagoonah turned her large coal black eyes upon Lord Clandon; and they vibrated with that lustre which on former occasions had struck him as so sinister, and which had subsequently haunted him for a period afterwards. That look which she thus bent upon him was full of a fiendish satisfaction—of a hatred which had succeeded a once all-potent love; and as she again turned her regards towards the magistrate, she said in a firm voice, "It is he!"

"When you first addressed me this afternoon," said the Inspector, "you entered into very minute details in respect to the murder which took place in the year 1829. Perhaps you have some explanation to give on that point?"

Sagoonah hesitated for a few instants; and then she said, in the same cold calm voice as before, "I have no objection to explain that subject. My royal mistress procured numerous volumes of an English newspaper called the *Times*, and I availed myself of opportunities to read therein the history of the murder at Oaklands. It was thus that I was enabled to follow up the clue which I had previously obtained in India, and to understand how it was that the prisoner had so long borne a false name."

"Mr. Coleman," asked the magistrate, "do you desire to put any questions to this witness?"

"None, sir," was the reply. "She best knows the reason that has led her to the perpetration of this black deed of treachery; and she may be left to the punishment of her own conscience."

These last words seemed to strike the ayah most forcibly; for she gave a convulsive start—she gasped as if about to say something—and then staggering back from the witness-box, she sank upon the seat a little way in the rear.

"Prisoner," said the magistrate, "have you anything to allege wherefore you should not be committed for trial?"

"I have promised," replied Lord Clandon, firmly, "to leave myself in the hands of my legal adviser."

Mr. Coleman thereupon rose, and addressed the magistrate in the following manner:—

"Sir, I am perfectly well aware that you have no alternative but to commit for trial the nobleman who stands before you. But I have already stated that I wish public opinion to be suspended until a better opportunity shall serve for the complete investigation of this unfortunate and intricate affair. Rest assured, sir, that if my client shall reiterate in another place that declaration of innocence which I now make for him here, it is with a fervid reliance upon the justice of that heaven which may unravel those intricacies that human hands, if unassisted, cannot possibly disentangle. On the present occasion, sir, no more will be said on behalf of the prisoner."

The magistrate then formally decreed the committal of Lord Clandon for trial; and the prisoner walked forth with a firm step to the cab which was to convey him to Newgate.

Meanwhile Sagoonah had glided away from the court—availing herself of an opportunity when Lord Clandon was again whispering a few words in the ear of the faithful Mark, relative to the manner in which he was to break to Queen Indora the intelligence of his calamity.

We must now return to the Duke of Marchmont, whom we left at the moment he issued from the lawyer's office, leaving Armytage behind. The nobleman had not in the first instance arrived there in his carriage: he had been on horseback to see Madame Angelique; and from her villa he had ridden over straight to Bedford Row,—his groom holding his horse while he was in Mr. Coleman's office. On coming forth thence, he dismissed the groom, with an intimation that he purposed to proceed on foot: but it struck the domestic that there was a strange, half-wild, half-vacant expression on his ducal master's countenance.

And well might it be so!—for the soul of the Duke of Marchmont was a perfect pandemonium at that instant. He walked on through the adjacent Squares: he felt as if he were intoxicated—yet without any of the exhilarating effects which wine produces. There was an awful consternation in his brain; and never was he more bewildered than at present how to act. There were reasons which seemed to induce him to fly from the country; and yet he had not the power to take any decisive step. He longed for some one whom he could consult—to whom he could tell everything—who might become the depositor of the stupendous secrets that lay heavy as lead upon his soul: but where was he to find such a friend? All of a sudden he recollected that his brother—his own brother—must at that moment be undergoing an examination at a police-office; and he experienced a feverish, a burning desire to ascertain the result. No, not exactly the result: for he felt convinced that *this* must be a committal for trial: but it closely concerned the Duke's interest to learn what had transpired at the examination. He called a cab, and proceeded to an hotel in Covent Garden, where he asked for a private room and ordered dinner.

Oh! well may the reader imagine that this order was only given for form's sake: but the wretched Duke of Marchmont was unable to partake of a morsel. Food appeared to stick in his throat: wine seemed to suffocate him. He longed to ask the waiter certain questions: but each time the domestic entered, the Duke's courage failed him: he dreaded to hear something terrible in respect to himself. At length, looking at his watch, he found that it was seven o'clock; and feeling convinced that the examination must be by that time over, he could no longer endure the horrible state of suspense in which he was plunged. He therefore mustered up his courage to address the waiter, who he perceived did not know him, inasmuch as he called him "sir."

"Is there not some important examination going on close by, at Bow Street?" inquired the Duke, with an almost supernatural effort to command his composure.

"Yes, sir," answered the waiter. "They say that Lord Clandon has just been committed for trial, for the murder of his uncle, about nineteen years ago."

"I heard something about it as I came along," said the Duke, endeavouring to sip his wine with an easy *nonchalant* air: but he again felt as if it would choke him. "Has anything particular transpired? I mean did the prisoner make any confession? or did he deny——"

"The proceedings were not long, sir," answered the waiter: "only two witnesses were examined—the Inspector and a Hindoo woman; and all the evidence went dead against his lordship. I believe his lordship's solicitor denied the charge: but beyond *that* no defence was offered. You perhaps know, sir, that Lord Clandon is the Duke of Marchmont's brother?"

The Duke made no response: he could not: and the waiter, thinking that he cared no more for the topic of conversation, issued from the room.

The Duke began to breathe more freely; and he said within himself, "It is clear that without the evidence of Travers they can do nothing. Will he remain stanch? or will he — will he betray everything? The wretch, to have perpetrated forgery!"

Another quick revulsion took place in the Duke of Marchmont's feelings: the momentary idea of safety flitted away; and as he thought of Armytage a horrible sense of danger again smote him. That the ruined speculator was entirely in Coleman's power, was but too evident; and that the lawyer would use this power, the Duke felt frightfully convinced. He was now once more goaded to utter desperation: he rose from his seat: white as a corpse—haggard and ghastly—he paced to and fro in the room. He thought of flight—and he thought of suicide; but he dreaded lest by adopting the former course he should only be precipitating his own utter downfall, and throwing away the last chance of escape:—while in respect to suicide, he had not the moral courage!

Suddenly an idea struck him. It was an idea that arose from desperation's self: but no sooner had it entered his brain, than he clutched at it greedily. Ringing the bell, he ordered the waiter to give him his bill and call a cab. On entering the vehicle he said to the driver, "To Newgate!"

Away sped the cab; and it was followed by another, containing the lawyer's clerk who had been appointed to watch him: for Mr. Price was keen and shrewd, and was not likely to disobey nor neglect his master's mandates. In twenty minutes the cab which bore the Duke, drew up in front of Newgate; and his Grace alighting, knocked at the door of the Governor's house. On giving his name, he was at once ushered into a room, where the Governor received him with mingled sympathy and respect.

"This is a dreadful thing, my lord," said the prison functionary, who was by no means astonished to see Marchmont looking so pale, haggard, and agitated: "but it is an event for which your Grace must have been for long years more or less prepared, as it might have happened at any moment—although, I believe, your Grace fancied your brother to be dead?"

"I come to see that unhappy brother of mine," interrupted the Duke. "Show me to his cell—and let me be alone with him."

It was contrary to the gaol regulations to admit visitors to prisoners at that late hour in the evening; but on behalf of a Duke all such restrictions were readily set aside. The Governor therefore at once obeyed with alacrity; and he conducted Marchmont along the gloomy corridors towards the cell which Lord Clandon now tenanted. The massive door swung upon its hinges: a single candle was burning inside; and by the dim light Lord Clandon was discovered sleeping on the humble pallet. Yes—he was sleeping after the exhausting circumstances of the day; and he slept serenely too, with no convulsing starts—with no tossing nor heaving on the bolster—with no flinging about of the arms. The Governor closed the door, without bolting it,—having intimated to his Grace that he would wait at the extremity of the corridor.

The Duke of Marchmont stood by the side of the pallet, looking down upon the sleeping countenance of his brother. That brother was sleeping, as we have said, serenely; and the Duke murmured to himself, "Would to heaven that I could slumber like him!—Bertram!" and he placed his hand upon his brother's shoulder.

Lord Clandon opened his eyes; and on beholding the Duke he started slightly for an instant: then rising from the pallet, he said coldly, "What seek you with me?"

"Bertram, how can you ask this question?" exclaimed the Duke, adopting a reproachful look and tone. "Am I not your brother?"

"I have no brother," replied Lord Clandon: and for a moment his chest heaved as if with a convulsing sob. "No—I have not a brother! I had once a brother, whom I loved dearly and devotedly; but—but—that time has long passed—and for nineteen years," added Bertram, fixing his eyes significantly upon the Duke, "there has been no one in the world whom I could call my brother!"

"Bertram, your brain is turned," said Marchmont. "Pray listen to me! Gold doubtless can procure your escape—I will lavish it by thousands—by hundreds of thousands, if needful——"

"No more!" ejaculated Bertram, in a peremptory tone. "If all the doors stood open, and no one barred my egress I would not go hence! My destiny shall be fulfilled. I know what it is: I believe in God—I have faith in His justice! And now enough! Leave me!"

"No, no—I cannot leave you thus!" cried the Duke of Marchmont, easily converting his real agitation into a semblance of profound grief. "What horrible thoughts, Bertram, have you in your head?—why is your conduct thus unnatural towards me?—why did you appear before me at Oaklands, to scare me with the idea that I beheld one from the dead? Oh! you must escape—you must fly hence—you must betake yourself to some foreign country! All my fortune is at your disposal—I will beggar myself to ensure your welfare!"

"Leave me, I say!" answered Bertram, who was evidently struggling with violent internal emotions: "leave me, I insist!"

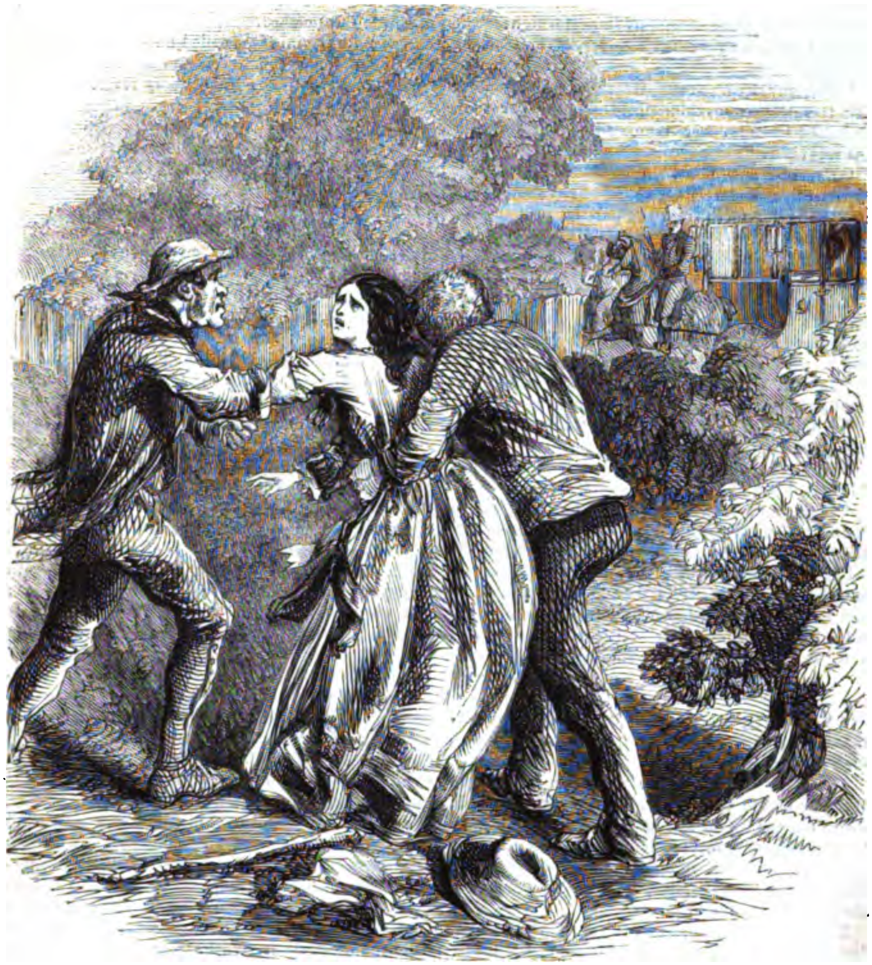
The Duke was bewildered how to act. There was a moment when he was about to fall upon his knees—to entreat—to implore—to give utterance to all the wild things which were agitating in his brain: but yet he dared not. He again looked at his brother: the prisoner's countenance now was cold, stern, and implacable; and as Marchmont hesitated what to do, Lord Clandon extended his arm towards the door, exclaiming, "Begone! I know you not as a brother."

It seemed to be by a sort of mechanical involuntary process that the Duke of Marchmont obeyed the mandate and slunk away from Bertram's presence. The Governor came hastily along the stone corridor to turn the massive key and fasten the heavy bolts which secured in his cell that captive who, nevertheless, would not have issued forth if every door of the prison had stood open.

"I hope, my lord," said the Governor, in a low sympathising voice, "that your unfortunate brother was grateful for this visit?"

"Do not question me!" replied the Duke petulantly. "Which is the way out?"—for the very atmosphere of that prison seemed horribly oppressive to the wretched Marchmont.

"This way, my lord," said the Governor. "It was towards one of the condemned cells that your Grace was hastening——"



The Duke could scarcely repress a cry of anguished terror at the words which had just smitten his ear; and he rushed into the diverging passage, as if wildly anxious to escape from the air he was now breathing. The Governor of course attributed all this display of powerful emotions on the Duke's part, to a sense of affliction on his brother's account; and he begged his Grace to walk into his parlour and take some refreshment. But the Duke gave no response; and issuing from the gaol, flung himself into the cab, in a state of mind that need not to have been envied by any wretch ever coming forth from that same prison to perish on the black scaffold erected outside.

The driver asked whither he should proceed; and the Duke answered, unconscious of the reply which he was giving. He had mentioned Belgrave Square; and thither the cab accordingly went. Mr. Price, Coleman's clerk, still followed at a little distance—until he at length beheld the Duke enter his own mansion in Belgrave Square, from all the windows of which a flood of lustre was pouring forth; for there was a grand entertainment at Marchmont House that evening.

The Duchess was receiving the *élite* of the aristocracy; and the splendid saloons were thrown open for the accommodation of the numerous guests. There was dancing in the state-apartment—there was play in the card-rooms—and the picture-galleries, brilliantly lighted, were the resorts of the loungers from the saloons themselves. The intelligence of Lord Clandon's arrest had only just reached the mansion: it began to be rumoured amongst the domestics—but to the company it was as yet unknown. When the Duke alighted from the common hack-cab—and pale, haggard, and ghastly, entered the spacious hall—the numerous lacqueys assembled there, naturally supposed, as the Governor of Newgate had done, that his Grace's appearance was produced by the intense affliction he experienced on his brother's behalf.

"What! is there company here to-night?" he inquired, in a wild vacant manner, of one of the footmen.

"Yes, my lord. Your Grace must remember that this was the evening fixed for the occasion. But shall I inform her Grace that your lordship has returned?"

"No, no—not now!" responded Marchmont impatiently: and reeling round like a drunken man, he issued forth from the palatial residence.

The domestics looked at each other, shaking their heads half-ominously, half-compassionately, as if they feared he had gone mad.

The Duke entered another cab, and ordered the driver to take him to the Regent's Park. There he stopped at the door of Mr. Armytage's house, and knocked an impatient summons.

"Is Mr. Armytage at home?" he inquired of the footman who speedily made his appearance.

"No, my lord," was the reply: "Mr. Armytage has gone into the country."

"Into the country?" ejaculated Marchmont. "Impossible! I left him this afternoon——"

"It is quite true, my lord," rejoined the footman. "Mr. Armytage came just now in a cab, along with another gentleman: he did not get out—but ordered a few necessaries to be put into a carpet-bag—and when it was brought to him, he said he was going away for some little time. He did not know for how long—but said that he should write and say when he was coming home again."

"And who was that other gentleman?" inquired Marchmont eagerly.

"I could not see, my lord," answered the servant; "for it was quite dark, and master was in such a hurry——"

The Duke tarried to hear no more, but turned abruptly away from the door and re-entered the cab. Twice did the driver ask him whither he was now to proceed, without receiving any reply: but on the third occasion of putting the question, he elicited the monosyllable, "Home!" which was abruptly jerked forth.

The Duke knew not what to think of this sudden departure of Armytage. He could not flatter himself that Armytage had contrived to settle with Mr. Coleman and get out of his clutches, without having to make the revelations which had been sought from his lips: for if it were so, Armytage would have been to him to claim the promised reward. On the other hand, the wretched Duke's fears suggested that Armytage was kept in a sort of custody by Coleman, in order to be brought forward to give his evidence when the trial should take place. Indeed, Marchmont was in that state of mind in which he dared hope nothing, but was forced to tremble at everything; and the most grovelling beggar in the streets was in the enjoyment of an elysian state of mind in comparison with this bearer of a ducal coronet.

On reaching Marchmont House, the Duke was found in a fainting state in the cab: he was borne to his apartment, and was soon raving in the delirium of fever.

Meanwhile the intelligence had spread amongst the guests that Lord Clandon was arrested and committed for trial: the Duchess was most painfully affected: she received the sympathies of her friends—and the brilliant assemblage broke up prematurely,—the grand supper that was provided, remaining untouched.

And now Lavinia was called upon to minister by the side of that couch on which her husband was raving madly with the brain's fiery fever.

CHAPTER CXXXIX.

REMORSE.

Return we to Sagoonah, whom we left issuing from the police-office after she had heard the magistrate pronounce the committal of Lord Clandon to Newgate.

We have seen that the words pronounced by the attorney, to the effect that the ayah might be left to the chastisement of her own conscience, had produced a sudden and powerful impression upon her mind. It was one of those species of menaces which being thrown out in certain circumstances, touch a particular chord in the heart, and cause it to vibrate painfully. Thus was it with Sagoonah. Love may turn to hate: but when a hatred, so engendered, wreaks its vengeance, it is all the more susceptible of a speedy and poignant remorse. And thus again was it with Sagoonah. She went forth from the police-office; and the memory of that threat haunted her. It appeared to have fastened upon her brain: it clung to her like a curse.

She wandered on, unconscious as well as reckless of the way which she was taking: the excruciations of remorse were strengthening within her soul. She thought of how devotedly she had loved Clement Redcliffe—of how gloriously handsome he was when first she knew him—and of the kindness with which he was wont to speak to her. She thought of that Royal mistress who had loved her—who had made her a confidante—who had ever treated her with so much affectionate tenderness—and who had even passed days and nights by the side of her couch when redeeming her from that death which might have otherwise ensued from the blow dealt by the assassin's knife. Of all these things Sagoonah thought; and her soul was rent with bitterest remorse for the deed of which she had been guilty.

She knew that the penalty of murder is death; and without pausing to estimate or conjecture the value of Lord Clandon's denial of the charge, she was only too painfully assured that he would be pronounced guilty. She would now have given worlds to recall what she had done: she had suddenly recovered as it were from the access of frenzy—the madness, in which she had taken so frightful a step against him. She pictured to herself all the horrors of the scaffold; and though she had never witnessed a public execution, yet her morbid imagination not merely conjured up all the real horrors thereof, but supplied fanciful ones to enhance the mental agony with which she was inspired. She awoke likewise as it were to a consciousness of her own position. She was penniless—she was houseless: she had renounced a happy home—had deserted a kind mistress—and had brought herself to the point of wanting food. Still suffering from her recent illness, she was now enfeebled and exhausted: she felt the gnawings of famine within her; and she had not a penny to purchase a morsel of bread. Her situation was in itself an almost adequate punishment for the foul vindictive treachery of which she had been culpable.

And remorse on one subject brought its companion-compunctions upon other points. Her conscience told her that she had been a murderess in inclination, although heaven had intervened to frustrate her plans. She had sought the life of her mistress with the bright-pointed steel and likewise by means of the reptile of deadliest venom,—that kind mistress who had ever been so affectionate towards her! Remorse on this account was now lacerating her heart and rending her brain. Her imagination was full of horrors: vainly did she endeavour to dispel them. It seemed as if her mental gaze perforce remained fixed upon the most hideous objects,—ghastly spectres that hemmed her in around—circled about her—stood in her way—and laid their death-cold hands upon her. And the evil spirits of her own creed likewise presented their phantom-forms to her vision,—forms of the dreadfulest aspect! She was burning in the fires of her own tortured conscience: she was seething in a lake of molten lava conjured up by her own fevered imagination. Though living, and upon earth, it appeared as if she were suffering the excruciations of hell itself.

And thus wandered on the wretched Sagoonah through the streets of London—experiencing an awful solitude in the midst of that crowded metropolis—feeling that she was a wretch to whom death would be welcome. But that death—how could she meet it? by what means was she to encounter it?

In the agony of her remorse she resolved to return to the Villa. Yes—to this her mind was suddenly made up. She thought that it would be an atonement if she were to fling herself at the feet of her mistress, and confess everything—although whatsoever she had to confess she knew had been principally revealed during her ravings on the bed of sickness. But all her thoughts were morbid: her mind had utterly lost its wholesome strength; and it was now pre-occupied with the idea that there *would* be atonement in the project she had formed. Oh! if she could only obtain the forgiveness of her mistress—it would be some balm to her heart; and she might at least die less miserably than she otherwise would.

And thus she proceeded towards the villa. But it was no longer with the hurried step of excitement that Sagoonah bent her way: worn down by fatigue and by mental suffering, she dragged herself along painfully. The lithe bayadere form was not now drawn up to its full height; the well-shaped feet no longer pressed the ground with elastic tread. It was as a miserable wretch—with the cares of a universe upon her shoulders, pressing like an intolerable weight—that the anguished Sagoonah was now making her painful way.

Meanwhile the faithful Mark, having taken a cab on leaving the police-office, had reached the villa. Queen Indora was anxiously awaiting his return: for she had a presentiment—aye, even a certainty of evil. Indeed it was but too evident that Sagoonah had been playing a darkly treacherous game, and that she meditated some additional perfidy. It will be remembered that immediately after the ayah had received her wound from the Burker's weapon, Lord Clandon and Indora, in a consultation together, had come to the conclusion that the *one* tremendous secret relating to himself had been fathomed by Sagoonah; and hence those porings over the *Times* of which Christina Ashton had given them information. *Now*, therefore, the Queen dreaded lest Sagoonah in her jealous vindictiveness should betray Lord Clandon's secret; and she had written a note to put him on his guard—that note which, as we have seen, Mark was unable to deliver ere the crowning mischief was accomplished. Therefore it was with intense anxiety that the Queen awaited Mark's return; and the instant she beheld him approaching through the grounds, she hurried forth to meet him. Though the faithful majordomo had intended to break the dreadful intelligence as delicately and gently as possible, yet he could not control the expression of his countenance; and the unspeakable sadness that it wore at once convinced Indora that the very worst had happened.

"Tell me instantaneously what has occurred!" she said: "delay not!—think not that you do me a service by studying my feelings! Your features betray the tale! I understand it all!"

"Alas, my lady," said the faithful dependant, "that I should be compelled to become the bearer of intelligence so frightful——"

"Come in, Mark," said the Queen; "and give me all the details."

She had not shrieked—she had not swooned: she gave no vent to passionate lamentations: but there was something unnatural in her calmness. The strength of her mind was sustained by a hope which was the *one* barrier that separated her from utter despair. That hope was the eventual demonstration of Lord Clandon's innocence.

She conducted Mark into a room, where they were alone together; and he told her everything that had occurred. She listened without interrupting him; and when he had finished his narrative of the proceedings, she rose from her seat, saying, "I will now go and comfort him in his prison."

"Pardon me, my lady," said Mark; "but this evening it cannot be. The regulations of the prison will prevent it. Lord Clandon desired me to implore your ladyship to postpone this visit until to-morrow—and *then* to repair thither under circumstances of the strictest privacy, so that your ladyship's name may not become inconveniently involved."

"I understand," said the Queen: "it shall be for to-morrow. And now Mark—my faithful Mark—no time is to be lost in carrying out the plans which circumstances dictate. You must set off immediately for Oaklands, the country seat of the Duke of Marchmont: you must privately obtain an interview with an old man named Purvis—and you must give him a letter which I am about to write."

Mark promised to do the bidding of his royal mistress in all things; and furnished with a letter, he lost no time in taking his departure. When he was gone the Queen sought Christina.

Our youthful heroine was overwhelmed with grief on account of Sagoonah's flight, inasmuch as Indora had given her to understand that the direst calamity to Mr. Redcliffe might be the result: for Christina had yet to learn that her brother's benefactor bore a lordly title. The Queen had assured Christina that she acquitted her of all blame in reference to Sagoonah's escape: but still the maiden reproached herself for not having exercised a sufficient degree of vigilance. Indora found her weeping in her chamber; and before she broke the fatal tidings, she renewed her declaration that Christina was utterly absolved from all blame on the *one* point which so sorely troubled her. Then the sad intelligence was imparted; and Christina learnt for the first time all the mysteries which had hitherto attached themselves to him whom she had only known as Mr. Redcliffe. Wild was the anguish of our heroine on hearing how terribly the Queen's presentiment was fulfilled, and how stupendous was the mischief which had resulted from Sagoonah's escape.

Christian Ashton now arrived at the villa. He had been passing some hours with Isabella Vincent: he had returned to Mortimer Street at the usual hour for dinner; and there he learnt from Mrs. Macaulay the terrible event which had taken place, and the rumour of which had just reached the landlady. Half frantic on his benefactor's account, and firmly convinced of his innocence—although until this moment he had ever believed in Bertram Vivian's guilt—Christian sped to Bow Street: but the case was over—and Lord Clandon had been removed to Newgate. Christian, in a state of mind bordering upon frenzy, proclaimed his intention of hastening to the prison to see his benefactor; but he was assured that it was too late that day to obtain admittance. He therefore sped to the villa, which he reached at the moment when the Queen had finished her sad narrative to Christina.

The three—namely, her Majesty and the twins—were now grouped together in an apartment on the ground-floor; and they were conversing in deep mournfulness on the one engrossing topic.

"But we must not despair!" said the Queen: "for God is powerful and just—and he will make the innocence of our friend apparent. Gradually for a long time past have incidents been developing themselves towards this end; and the sudden explosion of to-day may prove after all a necessary link in the chain, according to the inscrutable decrees of heaven. Oh, no! we must not despair!"

The twins gathered comfort from Indora's words; and it moreover occurred to them that she entertained hopes and projects which she did not deem it requisite at that instant to make known. There was a long interval of silence; and the lamp which was burning upon the table, shone upon the three mournful countenances of those who were in that room: for notwithstanding the hope which Indora cherished, and the partial consolation her language had infused into the hearts of the twins, they all continued to feel deeply the position in which Lord Clandon was placed.

The front door of the villa was standing open; and it now struck the Queen and the twins that the handle of the door of the room itself was agitated. They looked in that direction: the door opened slowly; and Christina at once recognised the dress which had been purloined from her own chamber.

"Sagoonah!" was the ejaculation which in mingled horror and astonishment burst from her lips.

"Yes, it is I—the wretched, the guilty Sagoonah!" said the Hindoo woman, as she advanced into the room.

She flung off the borrowed bonnet which she wore; and as the light of the lamp fell upon her countenance, it showed that a ghastly expression sat upon the natural duskiness of her complexion. Christian and Christina had started up from their seats in disgust and abhorrence towards the vile authoress of the calamity which had stricken their friend; Queen Indora was rendered speechless with amazement at the presence of one who she thought would never seek to behold her countenance again.

"Lady," said Sagoonah, advancing towards the Queen, "as you hope for mercy in the next world, have mercy upon me in this!"

"Sagoonah," replied Indora, coldly, and almost sternly, "there are deeds beyond all pardon; and you have been guilty of one to-day. Depart hence!—for if you linger, it will be only to provoke me to wreak a vengeance upon you!"

"Lady, if you would kill me," answered the ayah, in a voice expressive of utter misery, "you would be rendering me a service, at the same time that you would be inflicting a most righteous doom. You cannot loathe me more than I loathe myself: you cannot hold me in greater abhorrence than I am self-abhorred in the intensity of my own feelings. I have been mad: but now I have become lucid—and the clearness of my mind is horrible. Through the deep clear waters of the rivers in our own native land, have I beheld hideous monsters agitating in those profundities;—and thus on looking down into the depths of my own soul, do I discern things that appal, and shock, and horrify me. Although I must suffer terribly hereafter, I am suffering terribly now! There is a hell upon earth; and this hell has commenced with me. Now, lady, can you not have pity upon me,—*you* who are so good, so generous, so merciful!"

There was an indescribable anguish in Sagoonah's tone—a kindred agony in her looks. Her large coal-black eyes appeared to burn with the fearful fires that were consuming her within; and their terrific lustre played like flashes about her brows, as if she had received a portion of the doom endured by the fallen angels in that pandemonium to which the blasting lightnings of heaven had hurled them down. Christian and Christina looked on, appalled—dismayed—yet full of intensest loathing and horror, as if upon the corpse of one who had died of the plague and had come to bring its hideous infection unto them. Queen Indora rose from her seat: there was a death-like pallor upon the delicate duskiness of her complexion; but her aspect was cold, stern, and implacable.

"Sagoonah," she said, "it is impossible I can pardon you! There breathes not upon earth a more guilty creature than yourself. I look upon you as something more hideous, more envenomed, and more dangerous than the very reptile which some time back you brought into the house that it might deal death to me with its poisoned fangs."

"Yes, lady—I merit these reproaches," replied Sagoonah; "and I know that you are acquainted with all my guilt. I am not ignorant that amidst the ravings of delirium my crimes were revealed. But, Oh! suffer me to make the fullest confession now—to detail everything in connexion with the past—to describe the workings of my morbid, maddened mind during the various stages of my iniquity,—suffer me to do all this, and my conscience will be eased! *Then* breathe from your lips a single word of pardon—and you will be conferring a mercy upon a fellow-creature who is truly penitent!"

"What have you to confess that is not already known to me, vile woman?" demanded the Queen. "Oh! if you knew how your presence is loathsome to me——"

"It must be!—for my iniquity is immense," responded Sagoonah, with despair still in her accents and ineffable misery in her looks. "But is there to be no pardon on earth for the sinner, however great that sinner's crime, and when the contrition is commensurate?"

"Speak! What have you to confess?" asked Indora.

"You know not, lady, the temptation which led me on," proceeded the ayah. "I will not speak of the love which was potent even to madness: but I will speak of the manner in which it prompted me to lend a too willing ear to the words of a fiend in female shape who was sent to tempt me. That woman was Madame Angelique!"

Sagoonah then proceeded to relate everything which had at any time occurred between herself and the infamous Frenchwoman, but which we need not recapitulate to the reader—though it may be as well to remind him how Madame Angelique had instigated the ayah to make attempts upon the life of her royal mistress, and how through Sagoonah's intervention she had attained access to Indora on that occasion when she proposed to the eastern lady the visit to the Duke of Marchmont's seat of Oaklands. The Queen was by no means astonished at what she now heard: for Sagoonah's ravings had prepared her for intelligence of this kind: but to Christian and Christina everything was as novel as it was astounding and horrifying. They listened as if it were to some hideous tale of murder avowed in a condemned cell; and as they sat together, the sister clung to her twin brother as if to be by him shielded and protected from some danger that might befal her. As for Indora herself, she listened with a settled cold sternness of look,—a look such as that splendidly handsome countenance had never worn before.

It was at first in the deepest mournfulness that Sagoonah had begun her confessions: but as she proceeded, she grew excited: she interrupted herself with frequent appeals for pity;—she gave vent to passionate entreaties for pardon—her self-upbraidings and her declarations of penitence produced an alternation between an almost frenzied exaltation and a profound pathos.

"Oh! it is all true that I have told you, lady!" she cried at the conclusion; "and you see how that fiend of a Frenchwoman appealed to me through the medium of my weakest points to attempt all these enormities. Perhaps you may understand her motives better than I: and, Oh! leave her not unpunished—for she is one of those instruments of whom the Evil Spirit makes use to whisper dreadful temptations in the ears of individuals reduced to despair. Ah! that story of the snake—I know that it is scarcely credible; and yet it is all as I have narrated it! I myself shudder as I at present retrospect over the frightful details. You must remember well the day on which you took Miss Ashton and myself to the beautiful Gardens containing the wild beasts, the strange birds, and the horrible reptiles? But I will show you how I brought the envenomed cobra to the villa. Oh! I am so anxious to prove that everything I am telling your ladyship is correct!"

It was with the most profound excitement that Sagoonah thus spoke. In the distressed, the anguished, and the morbid state of her mind she continued to cling to the idea that by her present conduct she was veritably making an atonement for her past misdeeds; and she therefore considered it above all things necessary that she could convince the Queen of her statements in every one of their minutest details. Inspired with this idea, she repeated with excited ejaculation, "Yes—I will show your ladyship how I brought the hideous reptile hither!"

Thus speaking, Sagoonah suddenly burst from the room.

"Whither is she going?" cried Christina, affrighted at the vehemence of her manner. "She is frenzied!"

The Queen's first impulse was to command that the ayah should not be allowed to penetrate into any other part of the villa: but on a second thought she said, "Let her have her own way: the more perfect she renders her history the better perhaps will it serve my own purposes. One revelation leads to another; and we will let *her's* be complete."

"What frightful things have we been hearing!" exclaimed Christina with a shudder; "and though many of them were but the detailed repetition of much that we knew before——"

"Yet it is horrible for you, my dear young friends," added the Queen, compassionatingly, as she looked upon the twins, "to hear them in this elaborate and minute form."

Sagoonah at this moment re-entered the room, bringing with her that small leathern case, or bag, which had served her purpose for the transport of the cobra di capello from the Zoological Gardens to the villa. It was of Hindoo manufacture; and we have already described it as being large enough to contain a small rabbit. It had a cover which lapped over the mouth and was fastened with a button. Sagoonah had been up to her own chamber to fetch it.

"Here," she exclaimed, as she re-entered the apartment where she had left the Queen and the twins,—"here is the instrument which served my accursed purpose on that dread day!"

Then, in the same vehement and impassioned strain, she went on to describe how she had captured the cobra in the leathern case, and how she suffered it to escape thence into the couch of her mistress. The twins shuddered with a cold horror, as if the actual proceeding itself were being now realized in their presence; and even the strong-minded Indora could not repel a similar sensation —though there was in her mind a deep feeling of thankfulness to heaven for the manner in which she had escaped from the hideous peril.

"Yes," continued Sagoonah, displaying the leathern case with a species of frenzy, "it was this that brought the deadly reptile hither. Oh! would that it had darted its coils around my arm and plunged its fangs into my flesh!—what remorse would have now been spared me! Wretch—wretch that I have been! But I swear to you, lady, that such is now my self-loathing—so intense is the abhorrence with which I now regard myself—so sick and wearied am I of life, that were the envenomed reptile still within this case, I would plunge in my hand! Thus, thus would I plunge it in!—and if the serpent were torpid, I would excite it into its fullest and most terrible vitality——I would court its sting—and I would be thankful that I had the power so soon to perish!"

As she thus spoke with impassioned and almost frenzied vehemency, Sagoonah tore open the lapping cover of the case, and thrust in her hand. It was no mere stage-performance to produce an effect: it was the action of one who was labouring under morbid feelings most acutely excited. And as she spoke of stirring up the reptile from its torpor, she passionately ground her hand down as it were into the case: she imitated what she would have done in the circumstances which she was supposing. Her white teeth gleamed betwixt the parting vermilion of her thin well-cut lips: her eyes sparkled with unnatural fires. The twins thought she was going mad. Indora herself was about to use her authority and command her to be tranquil.

All of a sudden Sagoonah drew forth her hand from the case, which she immediately dropped; and then for an instant she contemplated the back of that hand with the most earnest scrutiny. She was seen to reel slightly: and then a cry as if of wild, half-frenzied, and terrible joy thrilled from her lips.

"Oh, I comprehend it!" she exclaimed, sinking upon an ottoman; "and death is coming to me at last! Lady, you are avenged—and my contemplated crime has brought its own punishment! Oh, I am dying!—the deadly poison is even now circulating in my veins! That case!—touch it not inside! Consign it to the fire—let it be consumed at once!—there is death within! The serpent has left one of its venomed fangs there!"

A horrible light now flashed in unto the brains of the Queen and the twins; and with a frightful clearness did they comprehend the ayah's meaning. Cries burst from their lips, as with one accord they sprang towards her. Indora lifted the ayah's hand; and a slight puncture—or rather scarcely perceptible scratch, from which a drop of blood had oozed forth—was visible upon the back of that hand.

"Oh! what can we do to save her?" cried Christina and her brother, as it were in the same breath.

"No earthly power can save her!" answered the Queen solemnly: "she must perish! O Sagoonah! had you lived I could not have forgiven you: but now that death has fastened upon you, I assure you of my pardon!"

The light of an unspeakable joy animated the dying ayah's countenance; and seizing with her unwounded hand one of the hands of her mistress, she pressed it fervently to her lips.

"May heaven's choicest blessings, lady, alight upon your head!" she exclaimed; "and may you yet be happy! Oh! something will yet arise to accomplish this happiness for you!—it is impossible that one so good and generous should be abandoned by heaven! Ah! what balm has your words poured into my heart! I shall now welcome death—for I have received your pardon! The poison is circulating in my blood: I feel it—Oh, I feel it! A film comes over my eyes! Place—place me upon the sofa!"

The dying ayah's wish was at once complied with:—again she took the hand of her mistress and pressed it to her lips. From those lips the vermilion, habitually so vivid, was dying away; and the brilliant lustre of her eyes was yielding to the glaze of death.

"Will you pray, Sagoonah?" asked the Queen: and kneeling down by the side of the sofa, she began reciting a prayer in her own native language.

The twins stood by, looking on with feelings of indescribable awe—Christina clinging to her brother, and he sustaining her with his arm thrown round her waist. For some minutes Sagoonah continued to repeat the prayer which the Queen was uttering: but the voice of the ayah gradually grew lower and feebler—until it sank altogether.

The guilty but penitent Sagoonah was no more!

CHAPTER CXL.

MADAME ANGELIQUE AGAIN.

It was the evening of the next day; and Sir Frederick Latham rode forth on horseback from his palatial mansion at Balham Hill. Completely happy now was the great City merchant in the confidence which subsisted between himself and his wife, the beautiful Anastatia; and that confidence had begun to engender love on both sides. Sir Frederick felt that he could not lavish too many proofs of his regard upon the wife whom he had so cruelly suspected: while she on her part was touched by the altered demeanour of her husband towards her. She comprehended that certain naturally generous feelings, which had long remained latent in the soul of a man entirely absorbed in worldly pursuits, had now been by accidental circumstances awakened; and though she was unselfish, yet as a woman she did her best to encourage them. Thus there was for this couple every prospect of a more real domestic happiness than they had ever before known; and Sir Frederick Latham could not altogether regret the circumstances which, though painful at the time, had given rise to this improved epoch in his wedded life.

It was a beautiful evening in the month of October: all the charms of a late autumn were prolonged; and the trees retained an unusual verdure for that season of the year. Sir Frederick and Anastatia had dined earlier than usual, in order that her ladyship might pay a visit to her mother, who continued to be somewhat indisposed; while the merchant himself, taking advantage of the loveliness of the evening, went forth for a ride on horseback. It happened that he was unattended by a groom on this occasion, for some reason which it is not worth while to describe. It was by accident, and with no settled purpose in view, that Sir Frederick Latham rode in the direction of Brixton Hill,—where, as it will be recollected, Madame Angelique's villa was situated.

But let us leave Sir Frederick for a few minutes, while we look into the interior of that villa.

Madame Angelique was seated at dessert: but her countenance bore the evidences of a certain inward trouble or uneasiness. It was clear that the milliner, on retiring from business, had not found the mental tranquillity which she had hoped to experience in the seclusion of her beautiful villa. Presently there was a knock at the door; and Mr. Shadbolt was announced by the pretty parlour-maid, whose face expressed mingled anger and disgust; for she detested this visitor, and he had just taken the liberty of tapping her cheek in the hall. Mr. Shadbolt—as was now usual with him—had been dining luxuriantly, and it seemed as if the viands of which he had partaken, had been washed down with a considerable amount of generous wine. Indeed it was in a state of semi-ebriety that he was thus introduced into Madame Angelique's presence.

"Well, what news?" he inquired, taking a seat, and at once filling a wine-glass for himself.

"It is singular that I have not seen the Duke," replied Madame Angelique, rather in a musing tone to herself, than exactly addressing her visitor.

"What Duke? Your friend Marchmont of whom you so constantly speak?" he inquired.

"Yes. I forgot I had not seen you since he called yesterday. It was immediately after you left."

"Well, I can tell you," rejoined Shadbolt, "that the Duke is lying in a desperate state at his house in Belgrave Square."

"Ah!" ejaculated Madame Angelique: and then she muttered to herself, "No wonder! no wonder!"

"I suppose you know," continued Shadbolt, "that his brother Lord Clandon suddenly turned up yesterday and was arrested?"

"Yes, I know it all," answered Madame Angelique. "I read the paragraph that was in this morning's paper; and the evening one," she added, glancing towards the *Globe*, which lay upon the sofa, "contains a longer account of what yesterday took place at Bow Street. It seems that the very Mr. Coleman concerning whom you had been frightening me so——"

"Yes—the arrest took place at his office," said Shadbolt, speaking with his mouth full of cake; "and the Duke himself was in the place at the time. There was a Hindoo woman too——"

"I know it," interrupted Madame Angelique curtly. "When the Duke called upon me after you left the villa yesterday, I told him all you had been saying to me——"

"Well—and what then?" asked Shadbolt with a momentary eagerness.

"Why, to speak plainly," responded the Frenchwoman, "the Duke was not much inclined to believe that Coleman was a man who would accept a bribe of two hundred guineas to desist from prosecuting me. However, he said he would go and see Mr. Coleman on my behalf; and, as it must have happened, the Duke's brother was there at the very same moment. So the Inspector said in the account of the capture which he gave to the magistrate, and which is in the newspaper."

"But the Duke did not come back to you—eh?" observed Mr. Shadbolt. "Well, all I can tell you is that if you hadn't given me that little douceur of two hundred guineas to slip into Coleman's hand——"

"I hope it is all right, and that you have not been deceiving me?" said Madame Angelique, looking very hard at Mr. Shadbolt.

"I deceive you?" he exclaimed. "What—honest Ike Shadbolt deceive his dear and intimate friend, the amiable and excellent Madame Angelique? Not I indeed! Look at me. Do I seem a man capable of playing such a dirty trick?"

"I hope not," responded the Frenchwoman; "and I hope likewise that everything is now safe in that quarter?"

The reader will have no doubt comprehended that the unprincipled Shadbolt had been playing a trick by working on Madame Angelique's fears, in order to obtain the money of which he stood in need: for his extravagances were unlimited, and he had taken to gambling.

"You see, my dear friend," he continued, refilling his glass, and helping himself to another slice of cake, "all those lawyer fellows are open to bribes; and as Coleman knows so much about you, we shall have to fee him occasionally. But what think you of letting me make an attempt in some other quarter, as a means of raising the wind?"

"No, never!" ejaculated Madame Angelique firmly. "That business of the Lathams was enough for me. I never was so frightened in my life!"

"Well, well," said Shadbolt, "just as you please. I must take myself off now: I just dropped in to inquire after your precious health, and tell you how nicely and comfortably I had settled that little affair with Coleman."

"But what of the Duke of Marchmont?" said Madame Angelique. "How did you learn——"

"That he was in so desperate a condition?" exclaimed Shadbolt. "Why, everybody at the West End is talking of it. It seems that he took on so about his brother, he went home in a state bordering on frenzy, and was seized with delirium. That is all I know. Ah! by the bye, there is something else I just now heard at the West End. The very Hindoo woman we were talking of——"

"What of her?" demanded Madame Angelique eagerly.

"She is dead," replied Shadbolt.

"Dead!" ejaculated the milliner.

"Yes, dead. Ah! by the bye," repeated Shadbolt, "I recollect you once asked me something about that Lady Indora with whom the Hindoo woman lived——"

"Yes—and you told me at the time that she was instigating Coleman to prosecute me."

"Did I? Well, I dare say it was so," observed Shadbolt carelessly: for though sufficiently sharp, he had not a memory strong enough always to retain the recollection of the numerous perversions of truth or actual falsehoods to which he was prone.

"But about this Hindoo woman — this Sagoonah?" said Madame Angelique.

"I could not exactly learn the rights of it," responded Shadbolt: "but there was a Coroner's inquest on her body to-day—and it appears that it took place quiet enough. I was told nowever that the Hindoo woman died from the scratch of a cobra's fang in a leather case in which she had brought the reptile with her over from India. The verdict was 'Accidental Death,' or something of that sort; and that's all I know of the business."

Mr. Shadbolt now took his departure; and the moment he was gone the pretty maid-servant entered to complain to her mistress of the man's rude behaviour every time he visited the house. Madame Angelique was deeply indignant; for she had sought, as the reader has seen, to appear as "a saint" in her neighbourhood. She did not therefore like to have the discredit of receiving such an immoral person as the said Isaac Shadbolt at her house. She promised her parlour-maid to put a stop to his improprieties; and the girl was contented.

Madame Angelique was more than half inclined to believe that Mr. Shadbolt had swindled her out of the two hundred guineas which he had alleged to be for the purpose of feeing Mr. Coleman; and the intelligence she had just received from her well-looking domestic aggravated her ill-feeling against Shadbolt. She inwardly anathematized the necessity of countenancing the visits of such an individual; and her thoughts being agitated, she went forth to cool her brain with the fresh air of the garden.

Madame Angelique was by no means astonished that the arrest of Lord Clandon should have produced such a powerful effect upon the Duke of Marchmont: for it will be remembered that his Grace had made certain unconscious revelations when he was at the ex-milliner's villa, after having experienced serious ill-treatment at the hands of the Burker. The Frenchwoman was glad that Sagoonah had passed out of this world; for she had ever trembled lest an investigation into the source of the murderous attack, which had been by mistake made upon the ayah, should lead to the exposure of antecedent circumstances, and thereby perilously drag in the name of Madame Angelique herself. But still, though that one cause of apprehension appeared to have been removed, the Frenchwoman was far from being tranquil in her mind. She believed that the tangled web which the Duke of Marchmont had woven, might now probably be closing in around himself; and she had been so mixed up with many of his schemes and projects—though at the time unconscious of how far she was being used as a mere instrument, and to what special aims his machinations were directed—she trembled lest there should be a general crash, which might involve herself in the ruins. And then too there was this Isaac Shadbolt, who wielded a sort of power over her, and who she saw but too plainly was resolved to use her purse as his own—who came to the house at all hours—insulted her servants—disgraced her with his intemperance—and feasted at her expense,—there was this man, we say, whom she could not shake off, and whose presence she loathed. Thus, altogether, the ex-milliner found, as we have before stated, that on abandoning her business and retiring to her beautiful suburban villa, she had not alighted on a bed of roses.

She felt the want of fresh air; and therefore had she wandered forth into her grounds. She strolled through the garden, at the back of the house, and passed into a little paddock which lay beyond. It was a beautifully clear evening; and there was a bracing vigour in the air. Still it scarcely refreshed the heated cheeks and throbbing brows of the Frenchwoman: for presentiments of evil were in her mind. As she was walking through the paddock, her ear caught the sounds of some equipage in the adjoining lane: but the trees prevented her from immediately distinguishing what it was; and she moreover bestowed but little thought upon the circumstance. Indeed, so much absorbed was she in her own reflections, she failed to notice that the equipage had stopped at a little distance.

Presently a break in the trees revealed the equipage to her view; and she saw that it was a post-chaise. At the same instant she heard footsteps advancing towards her from behind; and turning round, she beheld two coarsely-dressed men approaching. They were attired as labourers; each carrying a stick in his hand. Madame Angelique was frightened: for she recollected that her men-servants were out on some business connected with the stable; and the situation of the villa was sufficiently lonely to justify her apprehension. A scream was about to peal from her lips, when one of the men said to her in a resolute voice, "We want you—and you must come along with us. All disturbance will be useless!"

Whereupon the speaker seized her by the arm, while his companion caught her by the waist—both alike forbidding her at her peril from crying out. The ex-milliner however screamed; and then a hand was instantaneously placed over her mouth—while one of the men exclaimed in her ear, "It is in the Duke of Marchmont's affair that you are wanted!"

This announcement at once paralysed Madame Angelique; and an awful consternation seized upon her. But at that instant some one was seen bounding towards the spot; and Sir Frederick Latham made his appearance on the scene.

Without pausing to inquire into the nature of the outrage—nor weighing the probabilities of some transgression on the Frenchwoman's part on the one hand, against a proceeding which at a glance was so suspicious on the other—the City merchant grappled with the two men; and a struggle ensued. Wresting the club from the hand of one of the intending abductors, Sir Frederick struck him to the ground; and the other at once took to his heels. Madame Angelique clung to her deliverer: but terror still stifled the power of utterance.

"Villain! what means this?" exclaimed Sir Frederick, thus sternly addressing the man whom he had stricken down, and who, half-stunned by the blow, was painfully endeavouring to rise.

But scarcely was the question put, when another person appeared upon the scene. This was Christian Ashton, who had sprung forth from the postchaise on beholding Sir Frederick Latham leap from his horse and rush to the assistance of the ex-milliner.

The recognition of Christian on the merchant's part was instantaneous; and our young hero hastened to say to him, "Suspend your judgment, Sir Frederick! I hold myself responsible for this

seeming outrage. Let me have a few words with you aside."

"Certainly, my young friend," said the merchant. "Your presence here is sufficient to induce me to suspend my opinion, as you desire."

"Madame Angelique," said Christian, now stepping up to the ex-milliner, and whispering these words rapidly but impressively in her ear, "in the name of the Lady Indora, the dead Sagoonah, and the infamous Duke of Marchmont, I command you to remain where you are! Dare to attempt flight—and I at once proclaim your numerous crimes!"

The Frenchwoman remained transfixed with a sense of awful consternation; and Christian now turned to address a few words to the man whom Sir Frederick Latham had felled to the ground, but who had by this time regained his feet.

"Hasten after your companion, and bring him back! Coward that he is! he might have known that I was at hand to shield him!"

The man to whom Christian thus spoke, sped away after his comrade; and our hero then again turned towards Sir Frederick Latham. Having assured himself by a glance that Madame Angelique showed no inclination to depart, Christian said to the merchant, "Without entering into all details Sir Frederick, I hope to be enabled in a few words to convince you of the propriety of a proceeding which you could not, in your ignorance of the facts, have regarded otherwise than as a most scandalous outrage."

Christian then gave some brief explanations, to which Sir Frederick Latham listened with profound attention.

"And it is not only Madame Angelique," added

Christian, "whom we are thus anxious to secure—but likewise that villain who is in the garb of a Lascar——"

"Ah! I saw by the newspapers," ejaculated the merchant, "that he is a wretch whom justice has long sought——"

"The same!" interjected Christian. "He is known by the terrible appellation of the Burker. From circumstances which have come to our knowledge——But no matter! for time is now pressing."

"Should that villain be still lurking in this neighbourhood," rejoined Sir Frederick,—"and should he happen to fall into my hands—for my people are keeping a sharp look-out—I will at once communicate with you. Rest assured that her Majesty Queen Indora may command my services in every respect; and I beseech you to convey this pledge to her Majesty."

"The two men are returning!" said Christian, as he glanced in the direction whence the individuals who had seized upon Madame Angelique were now retracing their steps from the palings at the extremity of the paddock.

"Madame Angelique," said Sir Frederick Latham, turning towards the ex-milliner, and addressing her with a cold severity alike of voice and countenance, "I can no longer interfere in your behalf. Certain circumstances have come to my knowledge which fully justify the proceeding instituted against you. You will find it more to your advantage to go quietly with this young gentleman and the men whom he has brought with him——"

"Good heaven! what will become of me?" moaned the wretched Frenchwoman, clasping her hands in anguish. "Oh, pray have mercy upon me! Let me fly to France! I vow and declare that never again will I show myself in this country——"

"Your entreaties are vain," interrupted Sir Frederick sternly; "and you have to choose between a quiet departure with Mr. Ashton, and a prompt arrest in the name of the laws which you have outraged. Which shall it be? Let your decision be quickly given."

"Oh! what do they mean to do with me?" cried the miserable Frenchwoman, who naturally pictured to herself all kinds of horrors.

"At present you can know nothing," answered Sir Frederick: "but I repeat the assurance that you have a better chance of escaping from the vengeance of the law by a docile surrender to present circumstances, than by a vain and useless resistance."

"This young gentleman seems kind and good," said the ex-milliner; "and I throw myself upon his mercy. Oh! sir," she cried, addressing herself to Christian, "pray be forbearing towards a miserable defenceless female! I go with you—I go with you!"

Madame Angelique however wrung her hands in anguish as she thus spoke; and she was so overpowered by her feelings that the two men were compelled to carry rather than lead her to the post-chaise. Christian conferred for a few moments longer with Sir Frederick Latham; and they then parted,—our young hero entering the chaise, and the merchant remounting his horse, the bridle of which he had hastily attached to a gate on first catching a glimpse of the attack made upon Madame Angelique.

The post-chaise drove rapidly away; and Sir Frederick passed round to the front gate of the villa. There he rang the bell; and the parlour-maid quickly answered the summons.

"Do not be alarmed at what I am about to communicate," said the merchant: "but your mistress has been suddenly compelled to absent herself for a time. It may perhaps be to her interest that you say as little on the subject as possible—that you devise some excuse—a sudden journey, or something of the sort; but this I must leave to your discretion. You know who I am; and let my word be a guarantee for whatsoever I am saying to you."

Sir Frederick rode off—leaving the half-dismayed, half-astonished Jane to put her own construction on the information he had imparted to her, and give way to whatsoever conjectures it might suggest.

The dusk was now completely closing in; and Sir Frederick rode onward in the direction of Balham Hill. He had not proceeded very far when on entering a lonely bye-lane which he took, he beheld a man walking slowly along in front of him. On a nearer approach he perceived that this fellow had the air of a travelling tinker: his apparatus was slung to a stick over his shoulder: and his garments were grimed with black. Sir Frederick thought nothing of the circumstance; and he was passing the man at a gentle trot, when the fellow began imploring alms. He however suddenly stopped short as if he recognised Sir Frederick: but he had said enough to enable the merchant to be struck by something in his tone. The next instant Sir Frederick—who was very far from lacking courage—sprang from his horse and threw himself upon the false tinker.

The man was however prepared for the attack: for at the instant the merchant leapt from his steed, the ruffian let his apparatus fall behind him, and aimed a terrible blow at Sir Frederick with his club. But the merchant escaped it; and the next instant the ruffian was hurled upon the ground.

"I know you!" exclaimed Sir Frederick, with his knee upon the villain's chest and one hand grasping his throat. "You are the false Lascar—the Burker—and heaven knows what else! Dead or alive, you shall remain in my power!"

The club had been wrested from the Burker's grasp; but he struggled desperately. Indeed, ill might it have fared with Sir Frederick Latham, had not a couple of labouring men suddenly appeared upon the scene; and they happened to be in the employment of the merchant himself. The Burker was secured, and conveyed to Sir Frederick's own mansion.

Intelligence of this capture was forwarded on the ensuing morning to Christian Ashton,—who sent back a written answer to Sir Frederick. The Burker was kept all that day, as he had been detained the preceding night, in a cellar at Tudor House; and in the evening Christian arrived in a post-chaise to receive the prisoner. The two labourers who had rendered such timely assistance, were allowed by the merchant to act as custodians of the captive during the journey to the place to which the ruffian was to be conveyed; and the whole proceeding was conducted with as much secrecy as possible.

CHAPTER CXLI.

A VISIT TO HEADCORN.

It was now a period of renewed bustle and excitement for Christian Ashton: but all the duties he had undertaken—and which either arose from his own sense of what was expedient in existing circumstances, or from the suggestion of the friends with whom he was co-operating—were most cheerfully performed. Cheerfully—yes! because it was in behalf of his generous benefactor that he was thus deeply, deeply interesting himself,—that benefactor who had given him a home, who had bidden him entertain no care for the future, and who had assured him that a fortune should be his own. All these things had Lord Clandon done for Christian Ashton; and gratitude was amongst the most eminent qualities of our youthful hero.

The reader has seen how he first became acquainted with the tragic history which so memorably attached itself to Oaklands—how he had read the newspaper-account in the library of Marchmont House in Belgrave Square—and how he had subsequently learnt many minuter particulars from the old steward Purvis. He had all along believed in the guilt of Bertram Vivian, *alias* Lord Clandon; circumstantial evidence had seemed so forcibly to substantiate that guilt. But he had believed in it only so long as he was in utter ignorance of the identity of Lord Clandon with Mr. Redcliffe; and *then*, the instant the intelligence of this identity was conveyed to him, the speediest revulsion took place in his mind, and he became as firmly convinced of Lord Clandon's innocence. Away went all circumstantial evidence!—scattered to the winds were all the facts which had hitherto combined to establish that individual's guilt: for Oh! it was impossible that Christian could associate such enormous turpitude with one whose life seemed so pure, whose heart was so generous, and whose philanthropy was so noble. And then too, Queen Indora herself had entered into certain particulars which tended to strengthen the conviction that Christian had now formed: and thus it was with no reluctance—with no fear of labouring in a worthless cause—that our young hero was at present devoting himself to such duties as the position of circumstances suggested.

In pursuance of one of these tasks, we find him taking his seat in a railway carriage at the South-Eastern Terminus, a few days after the incidents we have detailed in the preceding chapters. He was bound for Headcorn—that little village in the neighbourhood of Ashford, to which the unfortunate Amy Sutton had retired in order to conceal her shame from the world. In a couple of hours he reached his destination; and on proceeding to the neat little cottage where he had last seen Amy, he learnt that she was still residing there. She was not however at home at the instant he called: but Mrs. Willis, the farmer's widow who kept the cottage, at once recognised Christian and invited him to enter. In the course of conversation he learnt that Amy had become a mother a few weeks previously—but that the offspring of her dishonour perished at its birth. It further appeared that Amy had since been very ill; and that only a few days had elapsed since she left the couch of sickness to breathe the fresh air. She had now gone to ramble for a short distance in the adjacent fields; and her return might be soon expected. Mrs. Willis informed Christian that the unhappy young woman had suffered even more from mental anguish than from physical malady—that at times she had been seized with fits of violent excitement—while at others she had sunk into moods of the deepest despondency. All this the farmer's widow related in a spirit of benevolent compassion, and not with the whispering tongue of scandal; nor did she exhibit the slightest curiosity in respect to the motive of our hero's visit.

Amy soon afterwards made her appearance; and Christian was shocked by the alteration that had taken place in her. She was not more than twenty-five—but she looked a dozen years older: her countenance was thin, haggard, and careworn. He had known her as exceedingly handsome: he now beheld all her beauty faded; while her toilet—once so exquisitely neat—indicated, if not an actual slovenliness, at least a disregard for all personal embellishment.

The animation of joy however appeared upon the unfortunate young woman's features, as she welcomed Christian Ashton. She entertained both respect and friendship for our young hero; and she was deeply grateful for the present visit.

"I have often and often wondered, Mr. Ashton," she said, "whether you had forgotten me altogether. It would have been natural if you had; for the unfortunate and disgraced ones of the earth are seldom borne in the memory—unless it is to be thought of with contumely and scorn——although of these feelings I at least knew *you* to be incapable!"

"I *have* frequently thought of you, Amy," answered Christian; "and it has been with pity, sorrow, and compassion. You judge me rightly: I am incapable of regarding the consequences of another's black infamy as the results of your own willing sinfulness. Yes—I have pitied you; and even if I had not this day come to converse with you on matters of business, I should not have suffered a much longer interval to elapse ere making an inquiry after your welfare."

Tears were trickling down the young woman's countenance; and with a crimson glow upon her cheeks, she said, "You have doubtless heard from Mrs. Willis——"

"I have heard all that concerns you, Amy; and I have been distressed to learn that you have suffered so severely from illness. But on your part, have you received any tidings of the important events which have recently occurred in London?"

"Yes," answered Miss Sutton: "my sister Marion has sent me letters and newspapers——"

"Then you know that Lord Clandon is alive," interjected Christian,—"that he has been arrested——"

"Yes—and likewise that the villain Marchmont himself is dangerously ill. Oh!" exclaimed Amy, her eyes, hitherto lustreless, now flashing fire, "he must not die until I have wreaked some terrible vengeance upon him! It was but a few days ago

I received from my sister a letter giving me the hope that the period for such vengeance was near at hand——"

"To deal frankly with you, Amy," interrupted Christian, "it was upon these points that I came to confer with you. You cannot have forgotten all you told me when I was last here a few months back. You gave me to understand that your sister Marion was seeking to succour you in your plan of contemplated vengeance. You informed me likewise that she had become connected with Wilson Stanhope; and I have reason to know that Wilson Stanhope himself had some dark dealings with the Duke of Marchmont. Now I must inform you, Amy, that several persons are engaged in weaving the web so tightly around Marchmont that if he should recover from this dangerous illness into which his own tortured and harrowed feelings have no doubt plunged him——"

"Good heavens! what mean you?" exclaimed Miss Sutton, as a sudden suspicion flashed in unto her mind. "Is it possible that the safety of Marchmont himself is compromised by the arrest of his brother Lord Clandon?"

"You must not question me, Amy," replied Christian Ashton. "I am not now at liberty to explain everything I know. But this much I will tell you—that if you will abandon your own isolated and individual scheme of vengeance, and co-operate with those who, inspired by no vindictive feelings, are anxious only to expose wrong and make right come uppermost—if, in a word, Amy, you will league with us, and throw as it were into the common stock, all such means of prosecuting our plan as you may be enabled to afford——"

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed the young woman, with a fierce enthusiasm; "anything, Mr. Ashton, so long as there be a chance of inflicting a terrible chastisement upon the head of him to whom I owe my degradation and my ruin!"

"There is every chance, Amy!" rejoined our hero. "Tell me, therefore, in which manner and to what extent you can assist us?"

"You know, Mr. Ashton," continued Amy Sutton, "that my frail and unfortunate sister Marion suffered herself to be handed over as the mistress of Wilson Stanhope. She knew from me that this man Stanhope had been connected with the nefarious plans of the Duke of Marchmont: she knew likewise that it was my aim to wreak a fearful vengeance, if possible, on Marchmont's head. She resolved to succour me. For some weeks has she been living under the protection of Wilson Stanhope, towards whom she has displayed every evidence of affection; she has lavished her caresses upon him—she has insidiously assailed him with cajoleries—she has adopted every means to win his completest confidence. I need not tell you that he is dissipated—that he is addicted to wine—and that his habits are often intemperate. Thus has she succeeded in gleaning from him certain secrets of the utmost importance, but of which I myself am still unaware; for with a becoming prudence she would not entrust them to an epistolary correspondence. That these secrets, however, would be ruinous to the Duke of Marchmont if made known, I have not the slightest doubt. I was cradling myself in the hopes of a speedy vengeance, when the intelligence reached me of the vile Duke's serious illness—an illness which methought might end fatally. And I was striivng hard to regain sufficient health and strength to repair to London to see my sister, and ascertain from her lips all that she had gleaned from Stanhope in the moments of his ebriety, or when he was under the influence of her cajoling blandishments!"

"You have told me sufficient, Amy," replied Christian, who had listened with the deepest attention to the young woman's narrative, "to decide me how to act."

"But there is one stipulation which I must make!" ejaculated Amy, with a sudden access of fierce excitement; "and it is that whatsoever vengeance you wreak upon the Duke of Marchmont——"

"Understand me well!" interrupted Christian. "It is no vengeance which we are endeavouring to wreak: it is an attempt to expose his iniquity throughout all its various ramifications—and as I before said, to make the right come uppermost. All his crimes shall be made to pass like a hideous phantasmagoria of spectres before his eyes; and those who have been the accomplices or the witnesses of his several deeds of turpitude, shall be marshalled in dread testimony against him. On that occasion, Amy, you shall be present!"

"This is what I require!" ejaculated the young woman: "it is for this that I was about to stipulate! Make use of me as you will: but remember, Mr. Ashton, you pledge yourself that I shall not be forgotten when the crowning moment of retribution arrives."

"You shall not be forgotten, Amy," rejoined our hero. "On the contrary, your presence will be needful. From inquiries which I last night caused to be instituted in Belgrave Square, there is every prospect that the Duke of Marchmont will survive this illness, though so dangerous, into which he has been plunged."

"Oh, I am rejoiced! I am rejoiced!" exclaimed Amy Sutton; and the ferocity of a tigress glistened in her eyes.

The aspect of her countenance did Christian harm to contemplate it: but he could not utter a remonstrance nor breathe a syllable of rebuke: he needed the services and the co-operation of Amy Sutton; and he was forced to avail himself of her vindictive feelings for the carrying out of his own purposes. He remained in discourse with her for some time longer; and on rising to take his leave, he addressed her in these parting words——"

"Tarry you here for the present, to regain health and strength as speedily as you can; and when the moment approaches that your presence will be required elsewhere, you will receive a timely notification from me. You can let me know in a few days how your convalescence progresses; so that I may have the assurance of your ability to travel some little distance when the period for action shall arrive."

"Were I upon the bed of death," ejaculated the young woman, with another fierce glaring and flashing of the eyes, "I would not fail to obey your summons!"

"Farewell," said Christian: "the interval will not be long before your wrongs, Amy, will be avenged as terribly as you yourself could possibly desire."

Our young hero then took his leave of Miss Sutton,—having previously assured himself, however, that she had no need of pecuniary assistance: and retracing his steps to the railway station, he returned by the next train to London.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when he reached the metropolis; and he forthwith repaired to Mr. Coleman's offices in Bedford Row. The lawyer was at his place of business; and he immediately received Christian Ashton. Our young hero reported to him all that had occurred between himself and Amy Sutton; and Coleman listened with visible satisfaction on his countenance.

"Everything progresses favourably," said the lawyer, "for the grand, the solemn, and the awful *denouement* which her Majesty Queen Indora is contemplating. Travers is in our power: Madame Angelique is in our power: the villain Barnes is in our power. Amy Sutton will be forthcoming at any moment when we require her presence; and we shall now have Wilson Stanhope in our power. But there's something more still to be done——"

"Let me undertake it!" exclaimed Christian enthusiastically. "You know, my dear sir, there is nothing you can ask me to perform that I will not at once enter upon!"

"I know it," responded Coleman; "and with so much zeal in this good cause, it is impossible that we shall fail in eventual success. Mesh by mesh the tangled skein which his own crimes have woven, is closing in around the Duke of Marchmont; and he will live, Christian—he will live to encounter the ordeal! Scarcely an hour has elapsed since I obtained tidings concerning him. The dangerous crisis is past; and though he is still raving in the delirium of fever, yet the violence of that fever is subsiding, and his physicians have but small fear as to the result. Ah! little do they suspect for what they are bringing him back to life!—and fearful will be the awakening of that man from the unconsciousness which affords a temporary respite for him! But I was about to inform you——"

"This new task which I have to undertake?" exclaimed Christian eagerly.

"You know," resumed Mr. Coleman, "upon what grounds we were led to suspect that the villain Barnes had served as the instrument of the Duke of Marchmont's design against the life of Queen Indora—that design to which Sagoonah fell a victim!"

"Yes," replied Christian. "From the inquiries made by the police, in consequence of the information given by old Mr. Carnabie, it was ascertained that the Burker in his disguise had been lurking about the Queen's villa at the time the awful deed was committed——"

"And as we knew," proceeded Mr. Coleman, "that the deed itself arose from the instigation of the Duke of Marchmont, there was no doubt in coming to the conclusion that the Burker was his instrument. And such has proved to be the case: for the Burker yesterday confessed everything!"

"Ah! he confessed?" exclaimed Christian. "Then circumstances are indeed favouring us!"

"They are favouring us in all respects," replied Mr. Coleman. "I myself elicited everything from that villain's lips yesterday; and I returned to London last night. It appears from what he stated, that a lady overheard a certain discourse between himself and the Duke of Marchmont, soon after the assassin-attempt was made upon Sagoonah's life; and by the description, this lady is none other than Mrs. Oxenden."

"Mrs. Oxenden?" ejaculated Christian. "Ah! this accounts, then, for the intimacy which she formed with the Duke, and which the other day came to your knowledge."

"You perceive how we have been favoured," said the lawyer, "by what the thoughtless crowd would term chance, but which the thinking man would call providence. Yes—Mrs. Oxenden has been the Duke's mistress; and her testimony may be serviceable. I have caused the strictest inquiries to be made into her mode of life; and I find her to be, as you yourself represented her, one of the most profligate of women. She maintains a paramour—a young man of exquisite personal beauty, but as thoroughly depraved as herself, and with whom she is completely infatuated. My knowledge of the world teaches me that where there is such infatuation on the part of a woman, there is likewise the completest confidence; and however cautious she may be in every other respect—however strong-minded in the pursuance of her own worldly interests—she is nevertheless weak and foolish under the influence of that infatuation, and she reveals all secrets. We must therefore get Mrs. Oxenden into our power, through the medium of this Alexis Oliver. It is for you, Christian, to form his acquaintance; and methinks I can arrange a plan by which you can render him a service,—a service whereby you may all the more effectually gain his confidence and secure a hold over him. But inasmuch as Mrs. Oxenden knows you and has little reason to like you, she would speak prejudicially of you to Oliver; and therefore in your dealings with him you must assume another name."

"I comprehend!" observed Christian; "and I will lose no time in entering upon this new duty."

Mr. Coleman and our young hero conversed together for some little while longer; and then the latter took his departure from the office in Bedford Row.

CHAPTER CXLII.

ALEXIS OLIVER.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening of that same day; and the scene shifts to an hotel at the West End. In the coffee-room of this hotel Alexis Oliver was seated at a table, sipping his claret, and now and then partaking of the dessert spread before him.

We have already said that he was a young man of remarkable personal beauty—not above one-and-twenty—and possessed of features chiselled to a degree of even feminine delicacy. With a purse well filled from the ample resources of Mrs. Oxenden, Alexis was leading a life of dissipation, and enjoying himself in the manner best suited to his depraved tastes and debauched habits.

He was seated at that table, reflecting joyously upon the hopes which Mrs. Oxenden had lately been throwing out, relative to her intention of making herself Duchess of Marchmont. For a few days this idea had seemed to be reduced to hopelessness by the Duke's illness, which it was feared would terminate fatally: but Alexis Oliver had this afternoon been informed of the turn which had taken place in favour of Marchmont's recovery. It was therefore with additional gusto that he was now enjoying his claret,—having dined alone at that West End hotel where we find him.

Several other gentlemen had been dining at the same place: but one by one they had taken their departure; and Alexis was now alone in that coffee-room. He had not however been left a quarter of an hour by himself, when the door opened, and two new-comers made their appearance. One was Captain Stanley, who, as the reader will recollect, was a young man of about four-and-twenty, exceedingly handsome—and what was better still, of remarkably honourable character. His companion was our young hero Christian Ashton.

Christian had met Stanley after he left Mr. Coleman's office; and in the course of conversation it transpired that Stanley had some slight acquaintance with Alexis Oliver. Christian told him enough to make him comprehend that it was of vital importance to Lord Clandon's ultimate interest that certain measures should be carried out in reference to Alexis; and Stanley—who was himself a firm believer in the innocence of him whom he had known as Mr. Redcliffe, and who had saved his father's life in India—readily assented to succour our hero in his present enterprise. He entertained a thorough contempt and aversion for the character of Oliver: but he had no difficulty in temporarily crushing his scruples in order to further the interests of that imprisoned and accused nobleman to whom his father was indebted for his life. He and Christian had with little difficulty succeeded in tracing Alexis to this West End hotel which was one of the dissipated young man's favourite haunts; and the two now lounged in together, as if totally unconscious of whom they were to meet in that coffee-room.

"Ah, Captain Stanley!" exclaimed Oliver, starting up from his seat: "I am delighted to see you! Come to dine here, I suppose? Well, you could not do better. The turtle is first-rate—the venison excellent. As for the iced punch—commend me to it!"

Captain Stanley shook Mr. Oliver's hand with far more cordiality—or at least the appearance thereof—than he had ever before displayed; and presenting Christian, he said, "Allow me to introduce my friend Mr. Craven."

The introduction was accordingly effected; and then Captain Stanley said, "Had we known of the excellencies of the turtle and venison at this house, we would assuredly have proved them. But we have dined; and it was at a place where they gave us dreadful bad wine: so we determined upon coming hither to take just one bottle of claret."

"By all means join me!" exclaimed Alexis Oliver, who was charmed with Captain Stanley's urbanity of manner. "I shall be delighted, Mr. Craven, to make your better acquaintance."

Our young hero bowed in acknowledgment of this compliment; he and Stanley sat down at the same table with Alexis Oliver; and more claret was called for.

After a little conversation on the light floating topics of the day, Christian rose from his seat—ostensibly to glance at an evening paper which lay upon an adjacent table—but in reality to afford Captain Stanley an opportunity of whispering a few words, according to previous understanding, in the ear of Alexis Oliver.

"Who is this young Craven?" inquired Alexis, in a subdued tone, when Christian had left his seat in the manner just described. "He is quite a youth—he must be at least two years younger than I am—but exceedingly handsome——what the ladies would call a perfect specimen of masculine beauty."

"He is a desperate wild young fellow," replied Stanley; "with plenty of money—for his guardians make him a splendid allowance until he comes of age. He gambles and drinks—and, in short, my dear Oliver, he is twenty times wilder than you yourself are."

"The deuce!" ejaculated Alexis: "he must indeed be a precious young blade! So you have taken him in tow, Stanley—and are showing him, I suppose, a little of London life? But how the devil is this? I thought you were the very pattern of steadiness——"

"To tell you the truth, my dear Oliver," responded Stanley, with a significant smile, "I am heartily sick and tired of what the world calls a steady life; and perhaps too the stillest water sometimes runs the deepest. You see, my governor is rather strict and severe; and therefore what with partially being under terrorism, and what with having hitherto felt no inclination to be particularly wild, I have got the reputation of being altogether steady."

"And now you mean to break out at last?" exclaimed Oliver, laughing merrily. "Well, this is capital; and I like you ten thousand times better than ever I did before. Indeed, I do not know that I ever liked you at all until the present occasion——"

"Oh! if you only like wild people," responded Captain Stanley, smiling, "you will henceforth like me well enough, I can tell you! I mean to break out thoroughly and completely. In fact, I have begun. This young Craven and I are now constantly together——"

"You must let me be one of the party," interrupted Alexis. "The truth is, I want to get into a new set. All my old acquaintances have fallen off somehow or another—or disappeared, I scarcely know by what means. One is in the Bench—another has gone abroad with his regiment—a third has died—a fourth has married—a fifth has taken holy orders—and what the devil has become of the rest, I can't tell. Ruined and turned billiard-markers, perhaps?"

"Why, you really speak, Oliver," exclaimed Stanley, laughing, "like a man of sixty who had outlived all his acquaintances;—and yet you are not more than one-and-twenty!"

"Something of that sort," replied Alexis: and then he added with a half-affected, half-dissipated yawn, "When one knocks about town for two or three years, you know, one does begin to feel cursed old. But I say, Mr. Craven—or plain

Craven I shall call you—for it is decreed that you and I are to get uncommonly intimate together ——We have filled our glasses three or four times while you have been poring over that stupid paper."

"I was only looking at the Sporting Intelligence," observed Christian, with a smile. "The fact is, I have a bet or two——"

"Which is your favourite?" ejaculated Alexis eagerly.

"Seringapatam," suggested Captain Stanley—thus with readiness coming to our young hero's assistance; for he felt perfectly well assured that Christian knew no more of sporting matters than of what was taking place in the moon.

"I don't mind giving you large odds against Seringapatam," exclaimed Alexis Oliver: and from a small pocket cut slantwise on the outside of the left breast of his surtout coat, he drew forth his betting-book. "What shall we say?—a cool hundred to eighty?"

"Oh, by all means!" ejaculated Christian: and then drawing forth his own pocket-book, he proceeded to make a memorandum with as much artistic *nonchalance* as that displayed by Alexis himself.

"I am really glad I have fallen in with you two fellows," proceeded Oliver: "we will have rare games together. And to begin, let us have another bottle of claret?"

The wine was ordered; and when the first glasses had been discussed and approved of, Alexis Oliver—who was now more than half-intoxicated—began to discourse in that mysterious strain of semi-confidence which forms one of the phases of ebriety.

"The fact is," he said, "I am in luck's way at present. I don't like to boast, you know,—but there's the finest woman in all London——you understand me?—she is over head and ears in love with me; and I of course cajole her in a most exemplary fashion. I shouldn't let every one know what game is up: but as we have agreed to be stanch allies for the future, we mustn't have any secrets from each other. Have either of you heard of a certain Mrs. Oxenden?"

"Mrs. Oxenden?" said Captain Stanley, slowly repeating the name, as if in a sort of dubiousness whether he had before heard it mentioned or not. "Why, what did I hear? Surely that is the splendid woman whom Marchmont has had in keeping?"

"Well, you are right," rejoined Alexis. "And she *is* a splendid woman too, I can tell you!—full of passion, and devoted to me. There's no vanity on my part: but it is a fact that she can't endure the Duke——he's laid up now, poor fellow!—but as for your humble servant, she'd go through fire and water for him!"

"No doubt of it!" said Stanley. "But there is no compliment in telling you, Oliver, that you're just the young fellow to captivate the female heart."

"Well," observed Alexis, complacently caressing his beardless chin, "I may have made a few conquests in my time: but I won't say that I have, for fear you should charge me with vanity."

"Not I indeed!" exclaimed Stanley. "Every young man can tell a few tales if he likes."

"No doubt of it!" cried Christian, sipping his claret. "And as a matter of course amongst friends——"

"There should be no reserve!" ejaculated Oliver. "That's just what I say! It is astonishing how we three fellows pull together! I see that we shall get on swimmingly."

"And so this Mrs. Oxenden," interjected Stanley, "is so infatuated with you? What a lucky dog you are! But I tell you what my idea of a woman's love is. If she gives you all her confidence, then she really loves you: but if she keeps any secrets from you, then she doesn't in reality care a fig for you."

"Now, there again we agree!" exclaimed Alexis. "Between ourselves, I saw plainly enough that Mrs. Oxenden *had* some secret from me; and it was concerning the Duke too. Well, thought I to myself, 'I am resolved to worm it out of her:'—so I plied her with all sorts of cajoleries: I poured forth a volley of such vows and protestations—I made her drink champagne, too, of which, by the bye, she is particularly fond; and so by degrees:——"

"You're the cleverest fellow I ever met in my life!" exclaimed Captain Stanley, affecting to be in raptures with Alexis.

"I must give you credit for most excellent generalship," said Christian, throwing in the additional weight of his own flattery. "So it ended by this Mrs. What's-her-name——Oxenden——telling you everything—eh?"

"By Jove, I got it all out of her!" cried Alexis with a chuckle. "But you mustn't push me any farther. It's all very fine, you know, for friends to have mutual confidences: but that secret, you understand, is not mine to reveal. It's like a sacred deposit——"

"Oh, of course!" ejaculated Stanley: "keep your own counsel in that respect. Neither Craven nor myself would wish you to do anything that is unhandsome."

"Not for the world!" cried Christian. "But we don't drink!"

"Ah, the poor Duke!" said Oliver, shaking his head with a mysterious significancy. "If he only knew everything! By Jove, I could tell a secret if I liked! But I won't! No, no—it would be too bad!"

"I tell you what," said Stanley: "you shall both of you dine with me to-morrow. Let it be at the Clarendon Hotel at six o'clock."

"You shall both dine with me the day after," added Christian. "We will go to Blackwall."

"Now, these are arrangements that I like," said Alexis: "they prove that we are getting all right and comfortable with each other. The day afterwards you shall dine with me at this very hotel; and I'll show you whether I exaggerated just now about the turtle and venison. But what are we going to do for to-night?"

"Drink another bottle of claret!" exclaimed Christian, looking at his watch; "and then away whithersoever you choose!"

Scarcely were the words spoken, when the waiter entered the coffee-room; and said to Alexis Oliver, "If you please, sir, a person wishes to speak to you on very particular business."

"The deuce!" exclaimed the young gentleman, somewhat sobered by an announcement which evidently struck him as something ominous. "I don't like these persons who just want to speak to you!—Waiter, what sort of a looking man is he?"

"Well, sir," replied the functionary, thus appealed to; "he looks something like a sporting character—cut-away coat with brass buttons, sir—red whiskers, sir——"

"Oh, you had better see him!" exclaimed Stanley. "I dare say it is some fellow connected with the Turf, and who has heard that you are making up a book."

"Ah, very likely!" ejaculated Alexis, clutching at the hope. "Let him come in, waiter."

"Come in? Yes, sir," said the waiter: and he shuffled away with that peculiar coffee-room walk which it would seem every accomplished waiter must necessarily possess: but the man had upon his countenance a certain sly expression which failed not to attract the notice of Captain Stanley and Christian.

"The truth is," said Alexis Oliver, when the waiter had retired, "I have got four or five cursed little things hanging over my head. Mrs. Oxenden has given me the money two or three times to pay them: but it has always burnt a hole in my pocket, as the boys say at school. So it rather frightens one when a suspicious message is delivered."

The door of the coffee-room was now thrown open; and the visitor walked in. The door swung back on its hinges; but the waiter just placed it ajar, that he might listen outside to the proceedings, the nature of which he more than half suspected—and perhaps chiefly so from the fact that when the person in the cut-away coat had entered the hotel, another individual in a more seedy garb remained lurking against a lamp-post opposite.

The individual in the cut-away coat advanced with a polite bow towards the table at which the three young gentlemen were seated; and Alexis Oliver's looks showed that he was by no means reassured by the appearance of his visitor.

"*You*, sir, are Mr. Oliver?" said this person, at once singling out the gentleman whose name he had mentioned; "and my name is Solomons. You know my errand—sorry to disturb a gentleman at his wine—but Coleman the lawyer was peremptory in his instructions—and Mabley his client won't wait another hour. So you see, sir, it's no fault of mine: but I tried to do the business in as delicate a way as possible."

"What does all this mean?" exclaimed Christian, starting up from his seat with a well assumed air of indignation.

"Nothing that concerns you, sir," observed Mr. Solomons, with an air of exceeding politeness. "It's just a trifle of a hundred and ninety odd pound that regards Mr. Oliver."

"By Jove this is unfortunate!" cried Alexis. "I wish I hadn't been fool enough to go to Tattersall's to-day and buy the chesnut at Sir William Katchflatt's recommendation. Mrs. Oxenden too isn't at home——"

"What is it you require?" exclaimed Christian. "A couple of hundred pounds to settle this debt? I have the bank-notes about me——"

"Beg your pardon, gentlemen," interrupted the bailiff: "but Mr. Oliver must come along to my house while we search the Office to see if there's anything else out against him."

"And if so, I dare say we can settle it!" exclaimed Christian.

"Ah! that's what I call true friendship!" cried Alexis. "Bravo, my boy, I shan't forget this in a hurry! I suppose I must go to the lock-up——"

"Let us settle the bill here," ejaculated Stanley; "and we will all go together in a cab. There's nothing like seeing one's friend through his difficulties. Just step outside, Mr. Solomons: we will join you in a few minutes. I suppose you can trust us; and you'll have a couple of guineas for your civility."

Christian made a sign for the officer to comply; and Mr. Solomons, who had especial instructions from Mr. Coleman, hesitated not to do whatsoever our hero directed. He therefore withdrew: the waiter was summoned—the bill was paid—and the three gentlemen issued from the hotel. A cab was speedily procured: they took their seats inside: Mr. Solomons rode upon the box: and his man was left to tramp back to Chancery Lane on foot. During the drive thither, Alexis Oliver vowed eternal friendship to Christian, who played his part so well, that it seemed as if he was only doing the most natural thing in the world in undertaking to pay the debts of his new acquaintance. But all the time Mrs. Oxenden's paramour was thus expressing his gratitude, he thought within himself that of the green and inexperienced young gentleman he had ever encountered, his new friend Craven was assuredly the greenest and the most inexperienced.

The sponging-house was reached: the three gentlemen were shown to a room—more wine was ordered—and a considerable fee was exacted for the process of searching the Sheriff's Office at that time of night, for it was now past ten o'clock. Nearly an hour elapsed,—Alexis volunteering three or four songs, and appearing most supremely to enjoy the situation in which he was placed—as well indeed he might, considering that his debts were to be paid from the purse of another.

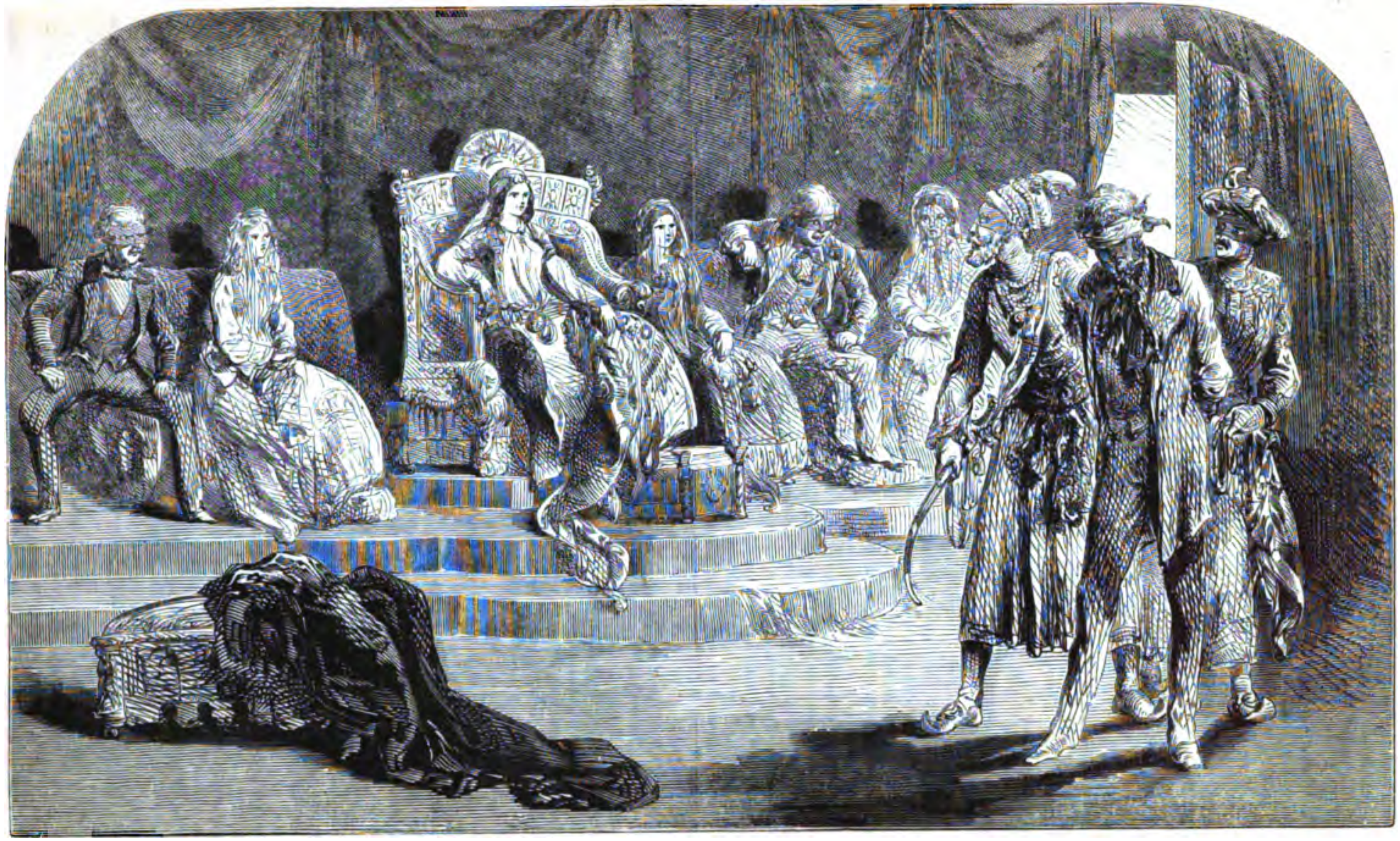
At the expiration of the hour, Mr. Solomons reappeared, with the intimation that there were other judgment-writs out against Mr. Oliver, and that the entire sum requisite for his emancipation amounted to four hundred and thirty pounds. Christian's pocket-book was produced; and bank-notes for that sum were counted down by him on the table with as much apparent indifference as if they were so many pieces of waste paper. Mr. Solomons received his fees in addition to the amount specified: another cab was summoned; and the three gentlemen took their departure, laughing and joking in the gayest possible humour.

"Now we will go and have supper somewhere and make a night of it!" exclaimed Alexis, as the cab drove westward until more specific orders should be issued to the driver himself.

"Come to my lodgings," said Stanley; "and I can promise you something choice and good for supper."

"With all my heart!" exclaimed Christian, before Alexis could interpose; for this young gentleman would have infinitely preferred Evans's or the Cider Cellars.

The order was given to the cabman; and to Captain Stanley's lodgings in Albemarle Street did the vehicle proceed. The table was soon spread



with oysters, cold fowls, a French raised pie, and some other luxuries of the kind sold by Fortnum and Mason in Piccadilly. Wine and spirits were also set forth by the Captain's valet; and Mr. Oliver exhibited his intention to enjoy himself to the utmost of his power.

Half-an-hour afterwards Captain Stanley, affecting to be entirely overcome by liquor, reeled off to his bed-room,—Oliver and Christian Ashton thus being purposely left alone together. There was no need for our young hero to mention the name of Mrs. Oxenden in order to revive the topic: Alexis himself speedily returned to a subject which he was particularly prone to harp upon when in his cups; and within the next half-hour he had revealed to Christian the whole particulars of the secret which he himself had elicited from his mistress. The source of the hold which she had obtained upon the Duke of Marchmont was thus completely fathomed by our hero: but it cost him an infinite amount of dissimulation, as well as the necessity to drink an inordinate quantity of liquor in order to keep Alexis company, so that he might thus worm the details out of him.

It was about one o'clock in the morning when Christian and the valet conveyed Mr. Oliver to a cab and sent him home to his own lodgings. Our hero then sought Captain Stanley, who had not retired to rest, but was awaiting in his chamber the issue of the *tête-a-tête;* and infinite was his joy when he learnt how completely Christian had succeeded in his object. Infinite likewise was the gratitude of our hero for the succour which had been so ably lent him by his friend Stanley, and which had in a few hours brought to a conclusion an undertaking that otherwise might have lasted several days.

It was about ten o'clock on the following morning—or rather we might say, on the same morning—that Mrs. Oxenden had just finished her breakfast, when a servant entered the elegant parlour in which she was seated, and presented her a note. She read it: the colour went and came in rapid transitions upon her cheeks: she looked frightened and enraged by turns—she hesitated what instructions to give the servant, who was waiting near the door; and at length she said, "You may show the gentleman up."

The domestic obeyed the order; and the visitor was ushered into Mrs. Oxenden's presence. She had risen from her seat; and without either resuming it or requesting him to take a chair, she said, with an effort to assume a dignified and haughty composure, "You, sir, are the writer of this letter?"

"My name is Coleman, madam," replied the visitor; "and that name appears as the signature to the note. You surely can recollect that you have seen me before—you once called at my office on some affair relative to your husband——"

"And you tell me, sir, in this note," interrupted Mrs. Oxenden, "that you require an immediate interview with me—that you bid me beware how I refuse it—that things have come to your knowledge which place me more in your power than I may probably suspect——"

"All this is true, madam," rejoined the solicitor calmly; "and I repeat the same in your presence."

What—what do you mean?" faltered Mrs. Oxenden, becoming more and more frightened, as well as proportionably less able to conceal her terror; for she knew that Mr. Coleman was the solicitor engaged in the defence of Lord Clandon—and she liked as little as could be to find herself mixed up in any of the affairs which might more or less ominously regard the Duke of Marchmont.

"It has come to my knowledge, madam," resumed Mr. Coleman, "that you are acquainted with a very serious offence committed by his Grace of Marchmont, and that you have not given such information as might tend to place him within the grasp of the law. To have the knowledge of a crime committed by another, and to remain silent on the subject, is to render oneself an accessory after the fact—which in itself, madam, is a heinous offence, and the penalty of which in the present instance is transportation!"

The colour now completely fled from Mrs. Oxenden's cheeks; and vain were all her efforts to appear calm and collected. She flung an appealing look upon the solicitor, and faltered forth, "What would you, then, with me?"

"I require you, madam," replied Mr. Coleman, "to accompany me to a place at some little distance from London; and there you will have to give your testimony——"

"A Court of Justice?" exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, with terror and dismay depicted upon her countenance. "But I shall be branding myself——"

She suddenly stopped short; and Mr. Coleman, fixing his gaze significantly upon her, said in a solemn tone, "Yes—it is a Court of Justice at which your presence is required—but it is not a Court constituted according to the prevailing laws of this country—it is a Court formed under the influence of circumstances as peculiar as they are terrible. It is a secret tribunal, if you will—an Inquisition—but still a Court where the claims of justice will be paramount—where wrong shall be exposed and right shall be rendered triumphant. Now, madam, it is to this solemn tribunal that I adjure your presence; and if you refuse to accompany me, you must take the consequences."

Mrs. Oxenden experienced a deep and unknown terror at the language which flowed from the lawyer's lips; and though in the midst of the nineteenth century—dwelling in a city which is the centre of modern civilization—in a room where she had but to stretch forth a hand to make the bell summon domestic-servants to her assistance—or where she need but throw up the window and invoke the aid of the first passing constable to protect her against coercion—yet did she feel as if she had been suddenly carried back through the vista of past centuries, into the gloomy profound of those middle ages when the public laws were set at naught and individuals were cited by irresistible summons to appear in the presence of the dread secret tribunals. No wonder, therefore, that solemn awe and vague numbing terror seized upon this woman whose conscience was so far from pure; and no wonder that she, with all her natural strength of mind, should tremble and feel dismayed in the presence of that solicitor who appeared conscious of the power which he wielded over her!

"But for me, sir—for *me*," she faltered forth, "is there any peril to be risked? is there any punishment to be incurred?"

"Not if you obey me with readiness," replied Mr. Coleman.

"And the tribunal," said Mrs. Oxenden—"whom is it to try?"—but though she put the question, she more than half suspected what the answer might be, if it were given at all.

"It is not for you to question me thus," responded Mr. Coleman. "Suffice it for you to know that the Duke of Marchmont was guilty of a heinous crime in instigating a miscreant to take the life of an Eastern lady of exalted rank; but, as you are aware, the assassin blow was dealt at the bosom of another. Of that crime, madam, you have had a horrible consciousness: it is this that has given you your power over the Duke of Marchmont—it is this that has enabled you to plunge into all possible extravagances at his expense; and you have hushed the scruples of your conscience on account of the gold which he has lavished upon you! Now, madam, you may judge to what extent I might be enabled to compromise you by any revelations made from my lips: you can no longer remain insensible of my power to compel you to follow my directions in all things—or else, madam, to give you into the hands of justice as an accessory after the fact in the crime which the Duke of Marchmont instigated against the Eastern lady."

"But tell me, sir—tell me, I entreat," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, "how acquired you the knowledge of all these things?"

"Providence, madam," answered the lawyer solemnly, "often suffers the web of crime to be woven throughout long years, and to be shrouded in the deepest mystery. But in the end that same Providence, by its own certain though inscrutable workings, causes the circumstances of the crimes themselves to become the source and the means of their own betrayal: and thus it is in the present instance. Now, madam, I have said enough——I have even said more than I had intended when first entering into your presence; and it is for you to decide which course you will adopt. I leave not this house without you. I have ordered a post-chaise to be here at eleven o'clock. It now wants a quarter to that hour," continued Mr. Coleman, consulting his watch; "and in one capacity or another will you presently take your seat in that chaise. It will either be as a prisoner, in the charge of a constable, to repair to Bow Street: or it will be as a witness to appear at that tribunal of which I have spoken."

"Then I will go with you in the latter capacity!" replied Mrs. Oxenden.

"Good, madam," rejoined Mr. Coleman. "Make your preparations: I await you here."

Mrs. Oxenden left the room, and repaired to her bed-chamber,—to which she summoned her maid that a few necessaries might be packed up for the contemplated journey. Though sufficiently ill at ease in her own mind, she nevertheless now assumed a certain outward calmness of demeanour; and she told her domestic that the visitor was a legal gentleman who had called relative to some property which had been left her, and that she was compelled to proceed with him for a little distance into the country. Having given this explanation, she entered her boudoir to arrange her toilet for travelling; and almost immediately afterwards Alexis Oliver made his appearance by means of a private staircase.

Pale, languid, and suffering from the previous night's debauch, the young gentleman by his aspect betrayed the dissipation in which he had indulged. Mrs. Oxenden at once perceived it; and she said petulantly, "In spite of your promises, Alexis, you have relapsed into those ways that make you look horrible, instead of beautiful, as you ought to be!"

"Now, do not be angry, my dear creature!" he exclaimed, at once plying her with cajoleries. "I fell in with some friends—and you know that a man is compelled to do as others do."

"I am going away for a day or two, Alexis——indeed I know not exactly for how long," said Mrs. Oxenden; "and therefore I cannot find it in my heart to scold you——"

"Going away?" he ejaculated. "And may not I accompany you? It is doubtless on some party of pleasure——"

"Of pleasure indeed!" cried Mrs. Oxenden, with a sickly smile. "I fear that it will be very different! But I know not how it is—you have won all my confidence—I have kept no secrets from you—and I will tell you what has just occurred."

She then described the object of the lawyer's visit, and recapitulated the greater portion of what he had said to her. It happened however that she did not mention him by name. A look of dismay gradually expanded over the beautiful but pale and dissipated countenance of Alexis: his reminiscences, which were previously all confused, began to settle themselves and to acquire lucidity: he retrospected over the proceedings of the previous night; and now he remembered how the young gentleman whom he only knew as Mr. Craven, had wormed out of him all the secrets he had learnt from the lips of Mrs. Oxenden. He was shocked and frightened at his folly: he fancied that he himself was the author of all that was now occurring to Mrs. Oxenden; and the trouble of his mind was betrayed in his looks.

"Good heavens, Alexis!" she ejaculated, as a suspicion flashed across her brain: "is it possible that in your tipsy moments you can have betrayed me? Yes, yes—I see that it is so! But at least tell me, Alexis, to whom you have so incautiously spoken—for I will not accuse you of having acted wilfully!"

"Fool—idiot that I have been!" cried the young man, dashing his open palm violently against his forehead. "I would not for worlds have done this! It was last night—heaven only knows how I could have been so mad——"

"But who—who?" demanded Mrs. Oxenden quickly,—"who were the people that you were with?"

"A Captain Stanley, and a Mr. Craven."

"I know neither of them," said Mrs. Oxenden, deliberating over the names which she had thus heard.

"Captain Stanley," continued Alexis, "is about four-and-twenty—very good-looking—he wears a moustache—his manners are elegant. As for Craven, he is a tall, slender, elegant young man—with a profusion of dark glossy hair—large dark eyes—about nineteen I should think. Ah! by the bye, I recollect! Captain Stanley once called him by his Christian name—and that name itself is Christian."

"Christian?" almost shrieked forth Mrs. Oxenden. "Tall—slender—elegant, you say—about nineteen? With a beautiful set of teeth—and lips like those of a woman——"

"The same!" cried Alexis. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, it must be he! His name is not Craven—it is Ashton—Christian Ashton—and he is a bitter enemy of mine!"

"Heavens! what have I done?" exclaimed Alexis, now more frightened than ever. "Oh, I see it all!"

"And this Mr. Coleman—the lawyer who has come to me——"

"Coleman?" echoed Alexis, with a start. "Why it is he who caused me to be arrested last night!—and this Craven—or Ashton—or whatever his name is—paid the whole money with an appearance of the most off-hand generosity!"

"Wretched boy!" cried Mrs. Oxenden; "what is all this that I hear? You have suffered yourself to be made a dupe, in order that those designing fiends might extract from your lips whatsoever it suited them to learn!"

"Forgive me!" said Alexis, entreatingly. "You tell me that no harm will happen to yourself if you obey Mr. Coleman in all things. Is it not so?"

"That is the assurance he gave me," replied Mrs. Oxenden; "but placed as I am in circumstances so dreadful, how do I know whom to believe?"

Here there was a knock at the outer door of the elegant dressing-room; and the voice of the lady's-maid was heard, saying, "If you please, ma'am, the post-chaise is arrived, and Mr. Coleman is waiting."

"You must go, Alexis!" exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden: "I have but a few minutes left for my toilet!"—then as she embraced him, she said, "I forgive you for whatsoever mischief you have occasioned. Do not distress yourself about it!—let us hope that things will end well, and that I shall soon return! But for heaven's sake be cautious in future! You know that I love you, my dear Alexis—and for my sake—Oh, for my sake, be prudent!"

He vowed and protested that he would follow her advice: she placed a sum of money in his hands; and he departed by the secret staircase.

Ten minutes afterwards the post-chaise, containing Mr. Coleman and Mrs. Oxenden, drove away from the front door of the house.

CHAPTER CXLIII.

CHRISTIAN AND ALEXIS.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, and Christian Ashton was alighting from a cab at the door of Mrs. Macaulay's house in Mortimer Street. He had just returned from Newgate, whither he had been to pay his usual visit to Lord Clandon. Scarcely had he dismissed the cab, when he beheld a person hastening towards him; and he at once recognised Alexis Oliver. The countenance of the young man expressed the most fiery indignation; and Christian immediately suspected that this evidence of rage was connected with the proceedings of the previous night. He therefore assumed a calmly dignified demeanour, and thus awaited the explosion of Alexis Oliver's fury.

"Mr. Ashton," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden's paramour, "you are a villain!"

"Perhaps it would be better, sir," replied our hero "that we should avoid a disturbance in the open street. Be so kind as to follow me up-stairs: we shall be alone together; and to whatsoever you may say I shall doubtless be prepared to give an answer."

Alexis accordingly accompanied Christian up to the sitting-room: the latter closed the door—and then said, "I see, Mr. Oliver, that you know who I am: but I beg you to understand that I have no reason to regret nor to be ashamed of my proceedings of last night. Where there are high and important duties to be performed, the most honourable character will condescend to a little dissimulation; and really, after all, it does not strike me that you have much to complain of——"

"If, Mr. Ashton," rejoined Oliver, "you would throw in my teeth the pecuniary obligation——"

"Nothing was further from my intention!" exclaimed Christian. "Had you suffered me to proceed without interruption, I should have simply added that you were burning to reveal certain secrets, which I therefore had no particular trouble to elicit."

"But you have made the most villanous use of them!" ejaculated Alexis; "and you must give me satisfaction! Name your friend, sir; and mine shall call upon him this evening. I have been wandering about in the hope of encountering you—I thought it was useless to inquire your address of Captain Stanley, as he was evidently in your plot: but accident fortunately threw me in your way."

"If you consider yourself aggrieved, sir," answered Christian composedly, "I am bound to meet you according to the provocation you have just given me. I name Captain Stanley as my friend."

Alexis said not another word: but bowing haughtily, he issued from the room. He had already made up his mind whose assistance he would invoke in case he should succeed in finding an opportunity to challenge Christian to a duel; and he at once bent his steps to the house of the individual whom he thus purposed to engage as his second. This was none other than the Hon. Wilson Stanhope.

Mr. Stanhope was seated at the time in company with his mistress, Marion Sutton. It was an elegantly furnished apartment; and the young woman was half reclining upon a sofa, listening to the protestations of love which the infatuated Stanhope was pouring forth. She has already been described as a full-grown beauty, but still quite youthful, and with all the freshness of youth blooming upon her rich luxuriant charms. Already somewhat inclined to stoutness, yet with a perfect symmetry of form, she had an air of sensuous indolence—a voluptuous kind of laziness and languor

—as she lounged upon that sofa. Although it was now nearly four o'clock in the afternoon, yet she was still clad in a morning *deshabillée;* and this being open at the bosom, revealed the exuberant contours of her bust. Her light hair showered in myriads of ringlets upon her bare neck and shoulders, which were of dazzling whiteness. Her large blue eyes seemed to swim in a soft sensuous languor; and if an artist or a sculptor had required a model for the personification of Voluptuousness on the canvass or in the form of statuary marble, the beautiful but frail Marion might have admirably served that object.

She herself had no love for Wilson Stanhope: but, as he was handsome, and as he possessed (at least for the present) the means of keeping her in luxury, he was as well to her as any other paramour. Besides, in thus remaining with him, she had, as the reader has seen, an ulterior aim to serve—and this was on behalf of her sister.

It was shortly after four o'clock, when a young page in an elegant livery entered the apartment where Wilson Stanhope and his mistress were seated, to announce that Mr. Oliver was waiting in the parlour below. Stanhope at once descended the stairs to join him; for they were well acquainted, and frequently dined and drank copiously together.

"I want your assistance, Stanhope," Alexis immediately began, "in one of those delicate affairs——"

"You mean a duel, Oliver?" exclaimed Stanhope. "With whom have you been quarrelling? and what is the cause? Surely you have not found a rival in Mrs. Oxenden's affections——"

"Do not ask me for a single syllable of explanation relative to the cause!" ejaculated Alexis. "Suffice it to say that I have been villanously treated by a certain Christian Ashton——"

"Christian Ashton?" exclaimed Stanhope. "I know that young man well. I once fought a duel on account of his sister—she is a very beautiful girl——and as for that Christian himself——"

But Stanhope stopped short: he did not choose to betray to Oliver how Christian had fathomed and frustrated the nefarious conspiracy in which he had played so prominent a part against the peace, reputation, and happiness of the Duchess of Marchmont: nor did he feel inclined to mention how the young gentleman had dealt summary chastisement upon him on the occasion when he so grossly insulted Isabella Vincent in Hyde Park.

"Ah, you know this Ashton, then?" said Oliver. "But from the tone in which you speak, you can have no very friendly feeling——"

"Towards young Ashton? Not I indeed!" ejaculated Stanhope. "And therefore it will give me all the more pleasure to see you wing him in a duel. You are a good shot, if I recollect; and from what I know of Ashton's pursuits, I should scarcely think he ever fired a pistol in his life."

The two gentlemen conferred together upon the arrangements for the pending duel; and Stanhope then set off to call upon Captain Stanley.

In the meanwhile Christian himself had been to Stanley, and had informed him of the challenge he had received from Alexis Oliver. Stanley was grieved to hear that the adventures of the preceding night were to lead to such a result: but he saw no possible means of avoiding the hostile encounter. He accordingly undertook to second his young friend upon the occasion; and he was pleased to behold the calm courageous demeanour with which our hero contemplated the prospect.

Christian paid his usual visits to Shrubbery Villa as well as to the mansion of Isabella Vincent. He had resolved to say nothing of the approaching duel; but when he took leave of his sister at the one dwelling and of his beloved Isabella at the other, he felt the chords of his heart tighten painfully—though he suffered not his countenance nor his manner to betray the feelings which were thus inwardly moving him. He returned to his lodgings in Mortimer Street; and he spent a couple of hours in writing letters, which were to be delivered only in case he should fall in the hostile encounter. One was to Lord Clandon, thanking him for all the kindness which our young hero had received at his hands, and expressing the fervid hope that the measures then in progress would have the result which every well-wisher of this nobleman so earnestly desired. Another was to Christina; and therein the affectionate brother said everything that was kind and tender to his much-loved sister. A third was to Queen Indora, thanking her Majesty for all her goodness to Christina; and the last was to Isabella Vincent, taking the fondest farewell of her to whom Christian's heart was devoted.

Our hero was careful in preventing Mrs. Macaulay from suspecting the duel that was about to take place; and in this aim he fully succeeded. He retired to rest at his usual hour; and he slept soundly—for that young man had not a taint, much less a crime, upon his conscience. The little worldly affairs he had to settle—and which were summed up in the letters he had penned—were put in order: he was a youth of courage—and he feared not death, otherwise than on account of the affliction into which it would plunge those who were so devotedly attached to him.

A note, received from Captain Stanley before he retired for the night, had conveyed to Christian's knowledge the arrangements made by that officer with the Hon. Wilson Stanhope for the hostile encounter. Christian accordingly rose at half-past five in the morning; and while performing his toilet, he moved about the room with the utmost care, so as to avoid disturbing the landlady and her servants. Having secured his letters about his person, he softly descended the stairs, and at six o'clock issued from the house, unperceived by either of its inmates. Obtaining a cab at the corner of the street, he repaired at once to Captain Stanley's lodgings. This officer was ready dressed to receive him; and breakfast was upon the table. Christian partook of some slight refreshment: his demeanour continued calm, composed, and firm; and Stanley therein recognised the evidences of a courage suitable for any emergency, but which on the other hand was utterly apart from recklessness or bravado.

Captain Stanley's phaeton was speedily in readiness to convey himself and his young friend to their destination. A case of pistols was placed by the Captain's valet in the vehicle; and they stopped on their road to take up the surgeon who was to accompany them; for Stanley had communicated with this gentleman on the preceding evening. The equipage drove to Wimbledon Common; and almost immediately after this destination was reached, Mr. Stanhope and Alexis Oliver made their appearance upon the scene.

Captain Stanley advanced towards Mr. Stanhope; and taking him aside, said, "Have you thought of what passed between us last evening?"

"I bore in mind the representations you made me, Captain Stanley," was the response; "and I spoke to Oliver—but he is determined to fight."

"They are after all two mere boys!" observed Stanley; "and it is really a pity that this affair should go to such a length."

"Oliver is furious against your principal," said Mr. Stanhope; "and though he has not acquainted me with the circumstances, yet if I may judge by the general tenour of his conduct, the provocation he received must have been immense."

"Then it is impossible," said Captain Stanley, "to avoid an exchange of shots?"

"Impossible!" rejoined Stanhope.

"But you will bear in mind," resumed Stanley, "that if I have just now spoken—as well as last evening—in pacific terms, it has been entirely without the knowledge of Mr. Ashton. I would not for the world you should conceive that it was at his instigation——"

"Your word, Captain Stanley," interrupted Stanhope, "is sufficient on the point! I might have said that the only way of settling the matter amicably is by means of the amplest apology on Mr. Ashton's part——"

"And that apology," said Captain Stanley, "he would not make, even if I proffered my advice in such a sense—which however I should not do: for as I myself am acquainted with all the circumstances—and indeed was more or less implicated in them—I do not conceive that Mr. Ashton has acted improperly."

"We will now, with your permission," said Stanhope, "proceed to measure the ground and load the pistols."

These portions of the ceremony were soon accomplished; and Stanley, accosting Ashton, said to him, "My dear young friend, have you any instructions to give, in addition to those with which I am already acquainted?"

"None," replied our hero, in a voice that trembled not. "If I fall, Stanley, certain letters will be found upon me—as I have already informed you; and should that result compel you to take charge of them, you will execute your mission with all possible caution and delicacy."

"Rest assured, my dear friend, that such shall be the case!"—and Captain Stanley's voice trembled with emotion, while with fervour he shook Christian by the hand.

In the meanwhile Wilson Stanhope had conferred with Alexis Oliver; and these preliminaries being settled, the seconds gave the weapons into the hands of the principals. Christian had at first thought of receiving his opponent's fire and of discharging his own weapon in the air: but maturer reflection had determined him to abandon this plan. He felt that it would be a complete prevention to the possible demand of Alexis Oliver for a second shot, and might therefore be deemed an act of cowardice rather than of magnanimity on his own part. But on the other hand, our young hero had resolved to fire wide of his mark; for he would not on any account incur the risk of taking a life nor even of maiming a fellow-creature, if such results could possibly be avoided.

The two antagonists were placed according to the usual rules of what are called "affairs of honour:" the seconds stood aside—the surgeon was waiting at a still greater distance. Wilson Stanhope was to give the signal by dropping a handkerchief; and all was now in readiness for that portion of the ceremony.

The handkerchief fell—the pistols were discharged—Christian heard the whizz of his antagonist's bullet close by his ear—and he escaped unhurt. A cry burst from the lips of Alexis; the pistol fell from his hand—and the right arm which had sustained it dropped to his side. Being nothing of a shot, Christian had not noticed that while endeavouring to fire wide of the living target, a slight turn of his own body had brought his weapon within almost fatal aim of his antagonist; and thus, most unintentionally—most innocently, had he wounded that opponent. The surgeon was quickly upon the spot; and it was speedily ascertained that Christian's bullet had struck Oliver's right arm, near the elbow. Nothing could exceed our young hero's grief: but Stanley represented to him that he had really no need thus to torment himself, for that it was Oliver himself who had provoked the duel. The surgeon positively declared that no fatal result was likely to ensue; and Alexis, touched by everything Christian said, proffered him his hand, exclaiming, "Let us henceforth be friends!"

The parties were now about to leave the ground, when Christian, accosting Wilson Stanhope, said to him, "It is of the highest importance that I should have a few words with you presently. Tell me where we can meet. Will you call upon me at my lodgings at noon? or shall I come to your house?"

Stanhope was surprised at this address; and he said, "Why not speak to me here, Mr. Ashton?"

"When you learn what I have to say," replied our hero, "you will thank me for arranging that we should be alone together."

"Be it, then, as you will!" rejoined Stanhope. "I will call upon you at twelve punctually."

Christian mentioned his address; and we should add that before the parties finally quitted the ground, it was agreed, for the sakes of all, to keep the whole affair as quiet as possible.

Notwithstanding our hero had displayed so much firmness and courage, it would be ridiculous to assert that he was not infinitely rejoiced at his own escape from death or injury: though, on the other hand, he was greatly afflicted, as we have already said, on account of the failure of his attempt to spare his adversary. On returning to London, he took his leave of Stanley, whom he warmly thanked for his co-operation; and he proceeded to his own lodgings. Mrs. Macaulay and the servants fancied that he must have gone out at that early hour on some business connected with the case of Lord Clandon; and therefore not for an instant did they suspect that he had been risking his life in a duel. It was with a feeling of indescribable satisfaction that he destroyed the letters which he had written; and he now awaited the hour when Wilson Stanhope was to call upon him.

A little after twelve o'clock the expected visitor was announced. Stanhope detested Christian, for the reasons which are already known to the reader; but still he had a strong feeling of curiosity to learn what our hero could possibly have to say to him. This feeling therefore imparted to Stanhope's manner a certain tincture of eagerness, which prevented it from appearing sullenly constrained, as it otherwise would have been. As for Christian himself, he was cold and distant—while his countenance wore a look of resolution, which added to Stanhope's curiosity, though without awakening his fears; for he little suspected what was to follow.

Our hero bade him be seated; and also taking a chair, he said, "Mr. Stanhope, I am about to address you in a manner for which you are evidently not prepared: but there is a fixed determination in my mind—and I warn you at the very outset that you will have to bend to it."

"It would seem, Mr. Ashton," replied Stanhope, "that you wish to fight another duel with the least possible delay."

"Rest assured, sir," retorted our hero, but in a calm dignified manner, "that *you* are not in a position to demand any satisfaction at my hands!"

"Perhaps, sir, you will come to the point," said Stanhope; "for I hate enigmas."

"You must know, then," proceeded Christian, "that you are so completely in my power that you will presently go hence with me to a place whither I propose to conduct you—or on the other hand you will take your departure in the custody of an officer of justice."

Stanhope started, and turned very pale; for as the reader may suppose, his conscience was none of the purest, and there was more than one misdeed at which words so ominously vague might probably point.

"It may perhaps be sufficient," continued Christian, "to allude to a certain visit of yours to Oaklands——"

"Oh! if that's your game," ejaculated Stanhope, with a sudden feeling of relief as well as with accents of scorn, "I can afford to laugh at it, and perhaps at the same time chastise you for your impertinence in daring to deal in menacing language with me. The story is too old, Mr. Ashton! The Duke is not in a condition to say a word upon the subject: the Duchess does not want it revived; and your simple testimony in a court of justice would be utterly valueless. What on earth your motive can be in furbishing up an old weapon, I cannot conceive——"

"Be not so hasty, Mr. Stanhope," interrupted our hero: "you and I are alluding to two different things. I was not for a moment thinking of that visit of your's to Oaklands, when, as a conspirator against the reputation and the happiness of an amiable and innocent lady, your base designs were frustrated——"

"Then what *do* you allude to?" inquired Stanhope, now turning pale once more: for something beyond a mere suspicion of the truth naturally flashed to his mind.

"I allude to *another* visit, Mr. Stanhope, which you paid to Oaklands:"—and Christian fixed his fine dark eyes significantly upon the conscience-stricken man. "You perceive therefore that it is a visit of a more recent date——"

"Well, and what then?" demanded Stanhope, endeavouring to assume an air of bravado and defiance. "Suppose that I went down to dine and pass the night at Oaklands—is there anything very extraordinary, considering the terms of intimacy on which I have been with the Duke——"

"A horrible intimacy, Mr. Stanhope!" replied Christian impressively; "the intimacy of crime!"

"Crime?" he ejaculated, with another start.

"Yes, crime!" repeated our hero, with a still stronger emphasis than before. "Oh, sir! were it not necessary that this interview should have taken place, I would not have willingly invited to my presence a man who could have coolly deliberated over his wine upon a deed of murder!—a man who was prepared to sell himself as a bravo for the gold proffered by a miscreant who had not the courage to undertake the deed with his own hand!"

Stanhope sat pale and ghastly, listening in mingled terror and consternation to the words which came withering and scathing from Christian's lips.

"You see, Mr. Stanhope," continued our hero, "that more is known of your misdeeds than you yourself had fancied; and perhaps you begin to feel that you are veritably in my power! Every detail of the incidents that occurred and of the conversation which took place on that memorable night of which I am speaking, is known to me. The Duke purposed to hire you as an assassin; and you were willing to be hired! But at first you haggled at the terms. Fifteen thousand pounds was the price specified: you insisted on immediate payment—the Duke was equally firm in rejecting the demand! Ah! it was no wonder," exclaimed Christian, with infinite abhorrence and loathing, "that there should have been much distrust between two such men!"

Stanhope gasped with an attempt to make some reply; but he could not give utterance to it: the words wavered and died upon his ashy quivering lips.

"At length," continued Christian, entering into all these details for the purpose of overwhelming the man whom he sought to reduce completely into his power,—"at length the compromise was effected between villanous cupidity on the one hand and sterling villany on the other; and for one-half the sum which I have named—to be paid in advance—you agreed, Mr. Stanhope—yes, you——"

"Enough, Mr. Ashton!" exclaimed the wretched man. "What would you do with me?—what would you have me do? Speak—speak!—but spare me and be merciful!"

"You see," resumed Christian, "that when at the outset I warned you that you were in my power, I did not speak in vain. All that I have now told you can be proved, Mr. Stanhope, in a court of justice—and shall be proved too, unless you do my bidding!"

"Ah! ever since that dreadful night," said Stanhope, in a voice that was tremulous with mingled fear and horror, "I have entertained the most terrible suspicions in respect to a certain personage—I mean the Duke of Marchmont. Tell me, is anything transpiring——"

"Ask me no questions!" interrupted Christian; "but prepare at once to accompany me from this house to a place whither I shall take you. If you value your own safety, your compliance is the only means of ensuring it. Refuse—and you know the alternative!"

Christian walked to the window. It was an improvised and aimless movement at the instant: but as he glanced through the panes, he beheld a police-constable slowly passing on the opposite side of the street.

"Refuse, Mr. Stanhope," he exclaimed, "and the presence of that officer makes you aware of the alternative to which you will have to submit!"

Stanhope mechanically started from his chair, and likewise glancing from the window, beheld the officer opposite. It naturally struck him that Christian had purposely ensured the man's attendance there; and with a ghastly countenance, he said, in a hoarse voice, "Spare me, I entreat you! Bid me do what you will—and I obey blindfold!"

"I, at least," answered Christian impressively, "am incapable of ordering you to accomplish a crime! Great have your misdeeds been; and if you would avoid their consequences, you will now come with me. Your absence from London may last some days; if there be any one to whom you wish to convey an intimation to this effect, write a note at once, and it shall be duly delivered!"

Stanhope, availing himself of this permission, penned a few lines to Marion; and at the same time Christian sat down at the table and wrote to Marion's sister, Amy. When the two letters were sealed, he rang for one of the servants, and bade the girl take them immediately to the post.

"Now come with me," he said to Wilson Stanhope. "We will proceed by railway to the nearest point of our ultimate destination; and beware how you attempt to escape!—for at the first evidence of such an intention, I will mercilessly give you into custody."

"You have nothing to apprehend on that score," replied Stanhope, who was now reduced to the most abject state of submission.

Christian had his carpet-bag already packed for the journey: a cab was summoned; and he proceeded, in company with Wilson Stanhope, to the station of that railway by which they were to travel.

As the reader has seen, the last few days had been full of activity and bustle, excitement and business, for our young hero: but he had undertaken a task to which he had devoted all his energies, and which he was resolved should be carried out to a successful issue, so far as it depended upon himself. Others were labouring with equal zeal in the same cause; and every step that was taken, proved to be in precise accordance with the grand object that was being aimed at. The greatest interests were at stake; and it was therefore no marvel that so much enterprising spirit should be displayed—so many plans devised and carried out in all their varied ramifications!

At the same time of which we are writing, the crisis had fully passed in respect to the Duke of Marchmont: and he was regaining a perfect consciousness of the circumstances which had plunged him into the fever that had menaced his existence. But, Oh! he knew not—very far indeed was he from suspecting—those *other* circumstances which were taking a rapid and sure development,—a development which was effectually tending to strengthen the web that his own crimes had woven and which was closing in around himself!

CHAPTER CXLIV.

THE TRIBUNAL.

The scene now changes to Oaklands. It was about ten days after the incidents detailed in the preceding chapters; and a solemn ceremony was about to take place at the grand ducal mansion in Hampshire.

It was eleven o'clock at night; and we must introduce the reader into the largest State drawing-room at Oaklands. But very different was its aspect from that which it was wont to wear: for it was now hung all around with black drapery; and instead of being flooded with lustre, it was dimly lighted, so that the gloom which prevailed was made apparent rather than relieved by that feeble glimmering. As if however to throw this light upward with a ghastly effect, the floor was covered with white calico: but the ceiling, as well as the walls, was spread with sable cloth. At regular intervals the black drapery along those walls was gathered in such a way that the folds had the appearance of black marble pillars; and thus the monotony of an unbroken surface was avoided. A door standing half-open, showed that a strong light was burning within an inner room, and this added to the strangeness and striking awe produced by the general effect of the larger apartment. What this inner room contained, could not be descried from the other one; as the door was sufficiently closed for such concealment, unless the threshold were approached.

At one extremity of that vast apartment was a dais, or platform, raised to the height of two steps, and also covered with white calico. In the centre of the dais stood a large arm-chair, looking like a throne; and in this was Queen Indora seated. She was arrayed in white: the luxuriant masses of her dark hair fell upon her shoulders and floated down her back. She wore a flowing head-dress, which set off that sable hair to all the advantage which such contrast could afford. A magnificent shawl was thrown, as if negligently, over one knee; and nothing could exceed the solemn grandeur which invested that throned lady. There was a paleness upon the soft and delicate duskiness of her cheeks: her look was coldly resolute, without sternness or implacability. She seemed the Sovereign about to perform an act of sovereign justice.

Immediately on her right hand, sat a female closely veiled; and a little farther on, upon the same side of the throne, another chair contained a gentleman who wore a black mask. On Indora's left, sat first of all another veiled lady—then a man in somewhat coarse apparel, but whose features were completely concealed by a vizard of sable silk; and farther on was a female, somewhat stout in person, handsomely dressed, and also closely veiled. Thus, to look along that line, the Queen was beheld seated in the middle, with two persons on her right hand and three upon her left.

No other human beings were in that room at

the moment when, as the clock of Oaklands proclaimed the hour of eleven, we direct the attention of the reader thither. Silent, if not altogether motionless, sat those six persons: but all except the Queen afforded occasional though scarcely perceptible indications of either uneasiness or else of some other feeling, such as awe or suspense. Indora's large dark eyes burnt with a strong steady lustre: her red lips were slightly apart—not quivering nor moving in the least, but with their very absence of motion indicating that her thoughts were fixed and her mind intent on one special object which she had the conviction of being enabled to carry out. She did not once glance towards either of those who were seated on her right hand and on her left: she remained motionless in her throne-like seat—not with an ungraceful rigidity—but with all the natural and unstudied elegance of posture which was likewise consistent with the perfect dignity of her queenly bearing. She scarcely seemed to breathe, so statue-like was she!—for there was no tumultuous heaving nor falling of the superb bosom, so rich and so well developed in its sculptural contours. Altogether, with that magnificent and beauteous lady upon her throne—with the five figures (two masked and three veiled) on her right and left—with the funeral hangings to the walls and the sable pall spread upon the ceiling—with the white floor-carpet, giving ghastly reflection to the less than dim cathedral light that pervaded the apartment—with that powerful lustre which shone forth for a few yards from the inner room—and with the tomb-like stillness which prevailed,—it was a scene full well calculated to strike awe and terror into the soul of any one who might be brought into the presence of the royal Indora.

In a few minutes the sable drapery on one side of the room was agitated: it opened—and old Purvis, the steward, entered the apartment. He was dressed in deep black, with a snowy white neckcloth: his look was profoundly solemn; and it was likewise with the utmost respect that he advanced towards the throne upon which Indora was seated. Sinking upon one knee, he handed a card to the Queen, saying, "May it please your Majesty, *she* whose name is thereon earnestly implores a few minutes' private audience."

Indora, glancing at the card, seemed for a moment to be much agitated; and then a look of boundless compassion appeared upon her handsome countenance—while her bosom heaved with a deep sigh.

"I will see her, Purvis," she answered:—"yes, I will see her."

Thus speaking, Indora descended from the throne; and followed the old steward from the apartment by means of the same door through which he had entered. It communicated with the spacious landing; and as it closed behind the Queen, she said to Purvis, "You have not left them together?"

"No, your Majesty," he responded: "the Duke is in the waiting-room, guarded by the Hindoos: and the Duchess is in this apartment:"—at the same time he pointed towards a door on the opposite side of the landing.

"And her Grace is alone there?" said the Queen inquiringly.

"Her Grace is alone there," rejoined the old steward. "She is profoundly afflicted—she is likewise in a state of consternation——"

"Yes—she is deeply, deeply to be pitied!" said Indora, with another sigh. "But it is impossible that her feelings can be regarded in the present case. Sad indeed is the destiny of this poor lady—fated as she is to feel the effects of all her husband's stupendous crimes!—but the hand of justice cannot remain palsied nor the interest of others be sacrificed on her account. All this, Purvis, you comprehend as well as I."

"Your Majesty has already condescended to explain that much to me," answered the old steward. "I too experience an immense sympathy for her Grace: but at the same time I know that *her* feelings and interests must now be regarded as secondary to the accomplishment of those paramount duties which I am humbly but faithfully assisting your Majesty to perform."

The Queen smiled graciously upon Purvis; and she then passed on into the room where the Duchess of Marchmont was so anxiously awaiting her presence.

This was the second time that these two ladies had met,—that royal lady and that ducal one;—and now the latter, hastening forward, threw herself at the feet of the former. The Duchess had at length become acquainted with the sovereign rank of her who on the first occasion she had only known as the Lady Indora: but it was not so much in homage to a Queen that she thus knelt, as it was in the character of a suppliant to one whom she felt to be, by some mysterious and unknown means, the arbitress of her husband's destiny, and therefore of her own.

"Rise, Duchess of Marchmont!" said the Queen, bending down to take the hands of the prostrate Lavinia; "and receive at once from my lips the assurance of my illimitable sympathy! But at the same time let me not by those words appear to encourage a hope which cannot possibly be realized——"

"Oh! then there is something very dreadful which menaces my husband!" exclaimed Lavinia, starting up from her kneeling position: "and your Majesty is invested with the power to punish him! But, Oh! madam, the most beautiful of all royal prerogatives is that of mercy; and whether your's be now exercised in strict accordance with the law, or only by virtue of the moral power which you wield and which my husband's misdeeds have given you, yet do I beseech that the sentiment of mercy will not be forgotten!"

"Let us sit down together for a few minutes, Duchess of Marchmont," said the Queen; "and we will converse:"—then having handed her Grace to a seat, Indora fixed her large dark eyes earnestly upon her countenance, and asked, "Has your ladyship the slightest suspicion of the real cause for which your husband has been brought hither?"

"My thoughts are all in confusion," replied the Duchess; "and I know not what to conjecture—what to suspect! But doubtless it is that same subject which on a former occasion led me to seek an interview with your Majesty—some deep, deep cause of offence which my husband has given you——Alas! I fear me, the death of your Hindoo ayah Sagoonah?"

"The Duke of Marchmont has been very, very ill," interrupted the Queen, without giving any response to the observations of the Duchess; "and he has been raving in the delirium of fever. I know also that your Grace has been a faithful, a constant, and an affectionate attendant at the bedside of your husband. Tell me, therefore—did he never in those ravings give utterance to aught which might have led your Grace to suspect——Oh! how can I put this question to a wife?—a wife too who loves her husband, notwithstanding he is so unworthy of her!"

Indora became greatly troubled; for all her most generous feelings and all her most compassionate sentiments were excited on behalf of the unfortunate lady, who, pale and careworn, full of affliction—with a heart torn by vague wild terrors, and a soul tortured by suspense—was seated all trembling by her side.

"Oh! the ravings of my husband were sometimes terrible—terrible!" exclaimed the Duchess of Marchmont; "and yet they were so incoherent—so disjointed—that I could not comprehend them. Nevertheless, I must admit that I heard enough to carry the appalling conviction in unto my mind that his conscience was sorely burdened: for otherwise no imagination could have been so shockingly excited! And there have been moments too," continued the Duchess, now shuddering with a visible horror, "when hideous fancies have flitted through my brain——But no, no!" she ejaculated, literally shaking herself in the wildness of her harrowed thoughts; "it is impossible!—it is impossible!"

"At least, my dear madam," said the Queen, in her most soothing tone, "*your* conscience is pure—and you have naught to apprehend on your own account!"

"Oh! but what happens to my husband," exclaimed Lavinia, passionately, "will redound upon me! Tell me—Oh! tell me, what means the horrible mystery of all these proceedings? No sooner is my husband recovering from his dangerous illness—scarcely is he convalescent—when two emissaries from your Majesty present themselves at the house and demand an interview with him. They insisted upon seeing him alone: but I would not leave him—I clung to him—nothing could induce me to tear myself away from him at a moment when presentiments of danger had irresistibly seized upon my brain! Then they whispered some words in his ear: those words I could not catch—nor would he tell me what they were. But their power was talismanic, and their effects upon him were awful! Crushed and overwhelmed as if the call of doom had smitten his ear, he murmured forth his readiness to obey the summons which your Majesty had sent him through those emissaries. Then was it that I learnt for the first time that you were possessed of queenly rank; and I knew that if ever the diadem of mercy sat gracefully on the brow of any throned lady, it must be upon your's—and I resolved to accompany my husband! It was as a captive in the power of your emissaries that he was brought hither: it was as a criminal that I beheld him ere now separated from me. And here—in his own mansion, where none but he or I should command—do we seem to be aliens and strangers! Our very steward dictates to us: the domestics, assembled in the hall, look on in gloomy silence as we pass! Oh, madam! my mind is filled with horrible alarms! For heaven's sake tell me, what does it all mean?"

"It is impossible that I can give your ladyship any explanations now," responded Indora.

"Oh! did you not tell me on the former occasion when we met," exclaimed the Duchess of Marchmont,—"did you not tell me that for *my* sake would you forgive all his offences towards yourself?—did you not bid me return to my husband and assure him emphatically that it was on *my* account your pardon was accorded?"

"All this is true, lady!" answered Indora, still with the most compassionating tone and look: "but do you not remember that at the time I gave your Grace to understand there was a reservation on behalf of *another*—and that though I pardoned your husband for his misdeeds towards myself, I had not the power to acquit him of whatsoever offences he had been guilty of towards that *other*?"

"Yes, most gracious madam," replied the Duchess, anxiously, and full of suspense; "all this I remember well! But was not that *other* to whom your majesty alluded at the time—was it not Sagoonah?"

"No," rejoined Indora. "That other to whom I alluded, and on behalf of whom I so emphatically expressed a reservation—that other for whom indeed I had no power to speak, but for whom on the contrary I was myself working—that *other*, lady"—and after a few moments' hesitation, Indora added, "that *other* was Lord Clandon!"

The countenance of the Duchess, already exceedingly pale, now became ghastly white: and she seemed as if she were about to faint. Horrible suspicions—frightful misgivings, had evidently smitten the unfortunate lady, even to the extent of almost overpowering, crushing, and prostrating her utterly—those same suspicions and those misgivings to which she had already alluded as having haunted her fancy when listening to the ravings of her husband in the delirium of his fever!

Queen Indora had purposely mentioned the name of Lord Clandon in order to prepare the Duchess somewhat for the terrible *denouement* of all the proceedings which were now in progress; and yet it wrung the heart of the generous Queen to be compelled thus to shock, harrow, and appal the soul of a lady who was already unfortunate enough—whose affliction was already so great—and who was so completely innocent in respect to every one of the misdeeds that were this night to be charged against her husband.

"I beseech you, lady," said Indora, now rising from her seat in order to put an end to the interview, "to summon all your fortitude to your aid, and to take refuge in the resignation taught by the sublime truths of that Christianity in which I believe as well as your Grace. Whatsoever is now progressing must be accomplished, as if it were the irresistible progress of destiny itself! It is no persecution devised against *your* peace:—heaven forbid! Certain circumstances are engendered by the misdeeds of men: and, alas! it too often happens in this world that innocent beings become the victims thereof. So it may be now! What is right must be asserted; and whatsoever is wrong must be proclaimed. Again I say, Duchess of Marchmont, summon all your fortitude to your aid: and it were ungenerous—it were cruel—it were even wicked on my part to abstain from giving you this warning! I must now leave you: but I will summon into your presence an amiable and excellent young lady who will do her best to soothe solace and console you."

Lavinia listened with a look of dismay, and yet with a certain expression of gratitude, to this solemnly delivered speech. It portended something dreadful in respect to her husband; and her own tremendous fears were now frightfully suggestive. She could not speak—she could not give utterance to a syllable in reply to the Queen's address: but again sinking at her feet, she took Indora's hands and pressed them to her lips, as if to implore that as much mercy might be shown to her husband as circumstances would permit her Majesty to show.

Indora stifled a sob which threatened to convulse her own bosom; and pressing the hands of the Duchess, she stooped down, kissed her forehead, and devoutly murmured, "May heaven, my afflicted friend, sustain you!"

The Queen then issued from the apartment where this most painful interview had taken place; and she found Purvis waiting for her on the landing.

"Send Miss Ashton to the Duchess," said Indora to the old steward; "and bid her remain with her Grace until her presence shall be required elsewhere. Then having done this," added Indora impressively, "let the proceedings of the tribunal at once commence!"

Purvis bowed; and then said, "May I be so bold as to ask your Majesty whether the twins have a foreknowledge of all that is about to take place?"

"No, Purvis," answered the Queen: "as little as possible has been said to them—and they are ignorant for what object they have been brought hither. But I must not remain in conversation here: the solemn proceedings of the tribunal must commence!"

Having thus spoken, Indora returned into the vast apartment hung with black; while Purvis hurried off in another direction to execute her Majesty's orders in respect to Christina Ashton. On re-entering the state-room which had been fitted up with so much awful solemnity, and which in some respects resembled an inquisitorial scene of remoter and darker ages, Indora resumed her seat upon the throne. Nothing now remained changed in respect to the appearance of that apartment from what it was when we described it at the opening of the chapter. Upon the throne on the dais Queen Indora sat again—a veiled female and a masked man on her right—two veiled women and one masked man on her left. There too were the sable draperies on the walls—the black pall upon the ceiling—the ghastly white covering upon the floor. And still likewise was the strange mysterious light burning within that inner room the door of which stood partially open.

About five minutes had elapsed after the return of Queen Indora from her interview with the Duchess of Marchmont; and again was the sable drapery agitated on one side of the room. The door which that drapery covered had just opened—the hangings themselves parted for an instant—and the Duke of Marchmont was conducted in by the two Hindoos who had brought him in their custody from London. These Hindoos were officers in the household of the Royal Commissioners who a few weeks back had arrived from Inderabad to announce to Indora the death of her father and the intelligence that a throne awaited her.

The two Hindoos were dressed in their gorgeous uniforms, the splendour of which contrasted strongly with the sombre gloom of that awful tribunal. The Duke of Marchmont was blindfolded; and his hands were held behind him by his Hindoo guards. But as if nothing should be wanting to complete the solemnity of the whole scene, and to render it as strikingly terrible as possible to him whose eyes were about to be unbandaged that they might gaze upon it, the two guards themselves were masked. One of them had his sabre drawn in his hand, as an emblem that his royal mistress wielded a power which it would be vain for the captive criminal to dispute.

The Duke of Marchmont was conducted up to the front of the throne,—at a distance of about half-a-dozen yards from which his guards made a halt. They then unfastened the kerchief which bandaged his eyes. From the description already given of the entire scene, the reader may possibly imagine the extent of the awe-inspiring terror with which it thus suddenly burst upon Marchmont's view. Utterly unconsious was he beforehand of the spectacle that his gaze was thus to encounter; and when we consider what this spectacle was, and likewise bear in mind that the Duke of Marchmont's conscience was stained with countless crimes, it will require but little effort of the imagination for the reader to conceive the effect produced upon him. Having only within the last few days risen from a bed of sickness—still suffering physically, and incessantly tortured by all the wild apprehensions which had originally thrown him on the couch of fever—the Duke of Marchmont was but the shadow of his former self. So emaciated was his form that his garments appeared to hang upon him as if they had been made for another person: his countenance was thin, wan, and ghastly: his eyes were sunken in their sockets, the blueish tint of which enhanced the horrible aspect of their cavernous depths. Were it not that he was prepared for something dreadful, he could not possibly have sustained the shock which the appearance of the tribunal produced upon him as the bandage fell from his eyes.

He staggered, and would have fallen were it not that his guards sustained him. He beheld Queen Indora seated upon that throne; and it seemed to his appalled fancy that her's was now a terrible beauty, and that there was the aspect of the avenging Nemesis in her majestic looks. He glanced to her right—he glanced to her left: who were those veiled and masked figures? His gaze wandered elsewhere: what meant that light streaming forth from the inner room? what mysteries or what horrors were concealed by that open door? He glanced upon his guards: they were now masked—although he had previously seen their countenances when they had appeared at his mansion in Belgrave Square to summon him in Queen Indora's name to Oaklands. Oh! well indeed had all her Majesty's arrangements been combined to produce the most awful effects on the Duke of Marchmont's guilty soul!

It often happens that when a man who has for some time foreseen the wreck of fame, fortune, rank, and safety, is suddenly brought face to face with the tremendous convulsion itself, the courage of utter desperation seizes upon him. And thus was it with the Duke of Marchmont. All in a moment the most powerful revulsion of feelings took place within him; and he clutched at the wild hope that he might yet save himself by presenting a bold front to this tribunal in the presence of which he stood. And then, too, perhaps the thought struck him that the tribunal was only so formed in order to terrify him into confessions and extort from him avowals without which no good case could be made out against him. Perhaps likewise he fancied that there might be an inclination in another quarter to spare him as much as possible, and that his own brother was chivalrous enough to make the most fearful self-sacrifice that man could possibly make for the purpose of avoiding a terrific exposure that should startle the whole world. For if it were not so—and if these conjectures were not fraught with reasons for hope—why should all those proceedings be arrayed in mystery and darkness against him? why should not everything have been left to the regular course of human justice and to the development of legitimate process in the public tribunals?

But whatever were the thoughts, the calculations, the conjectures, or the hopes of the Duke of Marchmont,—certain it is that he suddenly assumed a different bearing from that which he had at first worn. He summoned all his effrontery to his aid: desperation's self nerved him to play a neck-or-nothing game,—to listen to all that might be charged against him—to ascertain precisely in what circumstances he was placed—to envisage the perils which surrounded him—and then to act, as circumstances should direct, either with grovelling entreaty or with lofty defiance. But Queen Indora had foreseen that through this phase the mind of the Duke of Marchmont would pass; and therefore had she spared nothing in her arrangements which was calculated to sustain the most awe-inspiring effects, and to strike him as it were blow upon blow, each one more powerful than its predecessor.

CHAPTER CXLV.

THE WITNESSES.

THE Queen, fathoming everything that was passing in the mind of the criminal who now stood in her presence, suffered several minutes to elapse before she opened the proceedings by word of mouth. At length she spoke. It was in a slow, clear, measured voice—sufficiently cold to convey an impression of the implacable sternness of justice—and yet not deviating from the feminine harmony which became her sex and her queenly station.

"Prisoner," she said, "you have been summoned by the force of circumstances before a tribunal which, though not constituted according to the laws of your country, nevertheless wields a power which you cannot possibly defy. I know full well all the hopes that you are now entertaining: but they will be defeated! Rest assured that I should not have undertaken a task in the accomplishment of which there was the slightest scintillation of doubt. Your own conscience must tell you whether you have in your lifetime perpetrated deeds that would render you amenable to any human tribunal; and if so, then are you amenable to this! Man of many crimes, the hour of retribution is come—and Providence has ordained that the tangled web which you yourself have woven by your countless iniquities, should this night close in finally around you!"

The Duke of Marchmont thought for a moment of making a reply: but a second reflection bade him remain faithful to the policy of hearing all that could be alleged against him: for he had by this time begun to suspect who most of the witnesses were, that either veiled or masked were arrayed against him upon the platform.

"Your crimes, prisoner," continued Queen Indora, "are now about to experience a terrible revival in your memory—even if that memory could ever have lost sight of them while conscience fed the eternal lamp which sheds its light in the desecrated sanctuary of your soul. As a train of spectres passes through the diseased imagination, so shall your iniquities, as well as their accomplices, their agents, or their victims, be presented in vivid reality to your view. First let me speak of that amiable and excellent wife of yours—the loving and affectionate Lavinia—whom by the basest of conspiracies you sought to brand with a charge as infamous as it was false, and to sully her purity in order that you might obtain a ground for her repudiation. This, which was the lightest of *your* misdeeds, would for any other man be crushing and overwhelming! And next I will speak to you of your black turpitude towards a young woman whose character was her only fortune—and against whom, by aid of opiate drugs, you perpetrated the foulest and most infamous outrage. Behold! she is here!—she who is alike a witness ready to testify of your black designs against your wife, and of your dark satanic villany against herself!"

Thus speaking, Indora pointed towards the veiled female who sat upon her right hand: the veil was thrown off—and the countenance of Amy Sutton was revealed. Looks of malignant hatred and fiend-like revenge were those which this injured young woman bent upon the Duke of Marchmont; and he recoiled in horror therefrom—not so much because the looks themselves touched a remorseful chord in his conscience, as because it struck him that the victim of his lust was there to gloat over his final undoing and utter fall.

"And now I would address you as a man," continued Queen Indora, "who endeavoured to suborn others to the execution of your villanous purposes—as one who lavished gold by thousands to induce a needy spendthrift to wield the bravo's dagger against my own life! Here is a deed which, if proclaimed to the world, would bring you before a tribunal constituted on a basis different from this one! There sits the man who can testify how he was thus suborned, and who on a previous occasion had lent his aid in your diabolical machinations against your own wife!"

While giving utterance to this last sentence, Queen Indora's extended arm pointed towards the masked individual who sat next to Amy Sutton, on the right hand of the throne; and when that individual took off his mask, he revealed the countenance of Wilson Stanhope. His countenance expressed a species of terror as if the man himself entertained but a vague idea of how all these proceedings would terminate, and was therefore by no means assured that exposure to the whole world would not ensue and that condign punishment would not overtake himself.

"And now I will speak to you," continued Queen Indora, "of a darker crime than even those to which I have alluded,—a crime which, when designed by you, was not altogether frustrated by circumstances—but which was so far carried into effect that it struck a fellow-creature, though *not* the one whom it was meant to strike: namely, myself! Prisoner, it was at your instigation that the assassin-blow was dealt in the garden of my villa-residence: and here is a witness who can testify to the discourse which subsequently took place between yourself and the agent of your iniquity!"

Thus speaking, Queen Indora made a sign for the female on her left hand, to remove the veil which covered her countenance; and when this was done, the Duke beheld Mrs. Oxenden. He was not altogether without a suspicion that she indeed was the veiled female who sat in that place: but when the suspicion was turned into certainty, he felt a horrible tightening at the heart—for it seemed to him as if even those whom his gold had maintained in luxury, were arraying themselves against him. This idea is always a harrowing one for the individual who feels that the ground is slipping away beneath his feet: because it is frightfully ominous of the crowning catastrophe. Thus the presence of Mrs. Oxenden there—his own pensioned mistress—was indeed another blow that struck upon the heart of the Duke of Marchmont more severely than the two preceding ones dealt through the medium of Amy Sutton and Wilson Stanhope.

"But if that testimony be not sufficient," continued Queen Indora, after a pause of more than a minute, "there is one here present who can give ampler evidence. That man has confessed everything; and if it be needful, the world may know how *you*, prisoner, suborned him to deal the assassin-blow which, though intended for myself, nevertheless smote the bosom of the unfortunate Sagoonah. He can tell likewise how you visited him in his dungeon-cell, when he was a captive in the hands of justice—and how you furnished him the means of effecting his escape."

The Burker, who was seated next to Mrs. Oxenden, gave a sort of low subdued growl as he removed the mask and revealed his hideous countenance to the Duke. The nobleman had already recognised him—but had scarcely fancied that he could have told so much; and therefore it was indeed another and severer blow which thus struck the guilty Marchmont.

"And now," continued Queen Indora, "for the last of these witnesses who in *this* place"—and she emphasised the word printed in italic—"may be specified as one who can bear fearful evidence against you. In more than one instance has she been the agent and accomplice of your iniquities. It was by her insidious representations that my unfortunate dependant Sagoonah, who is now no more, was led to meditate murder in respect to myself. Yes, prisoner—you see that your crimes in all their details and phases are well known to me! That woman—the only one who now remains veiled—has borne testimony against you, as the rest have already borne it. But she has spoken of things relating to which these others who are present have not been enabled to speak. Do you remember that one evening you by appointment met this man"—and the Queen pointed towards the Burker—"in a lane near a certain villa on Brixton Hill? Do you remember likewise that angry words took place between yourself and that man—that he demanded more of you than you chose to give—that you drew forth your purse to bestow upon him a portion of its contents—but that he, being resolved to possess himself of the whole, felled you from your horse? You see that *he* at least has maintained no reserve in respect to anything that concerns you! Nor has that woman. Do you recollect, prisoner, I will proceed to ask, that you were borne to the villa unto which I have already alluded, and that for some while you remained there insensible? Yes—you recollect all this! But you have yet to learn, prisoner, that in the first moments of your reviving consciousness you suffered words to escape your lips—or rather they involuntarily flowed from the very fountains of your troubled conscience; and those words, prisoner, were heard by Madame Angelique, who was in attendance upon you. Fearful indeed were those words—and to a fearful crime they pointed! If you doubt me, ask that witness herself! She will tell the truth."

Thus speaking, Queen Indora made a sign for the woman whom she indicated to throw back her veil: but the guilty Duke of Marchmont had already more than suspected who she was; and therefore he was not surprised when he beheld the countenance of Madame Angelique. But if he were not surprised, he was nevertheless stricken another blow; and this was far the severest of all: for Queen Indora's language had pointed towards that *other* crime which was the most terrible of the many that blackened his conscience, as it was the one likewise concerning which he had hoped that there would be the greatest difficulty in putting forward any substantial proof. He now appeared to be utterly unmanned: the bold hardihood that he had assumed, forsook him: every remnant of the air of defiance adopted at the outset vanished away; and he was on the very point of sinking on his knees and imploring mercy.

But again did a thought strike him: again did the very desperation of his circumstances nerve him with a preternatural courage. Therefore, quick as lightning, was the bold effrontery assumed again; and the air of defiance was adopted. It was still neck-or-nothing with this man who felt that he stood upon a mine, for the explosion of which there were a thousand chances against only *one* that he might possibly escape.

"Queen Indora," he said, now breaking silence for the first time, and endeavouring to throw a tincture of scorn into his accents, "you have marshalled against me an array of witnesses which constitute a goodly company to sit by the side of your Majesty. Commencing on the right hand, there is a notorious debauchee—an unprincipled profligate, whose relations have long cast him off, and whom society has repudiated—a man who, even according to your own account, has ever been willing to sell himself for gold. You are rich, Queen Indora—the wealth of the wealthiest portion of the Indies is at your disposal—and perhaps therefore you have well paid that man for his present services; and in proportion to the reward given him is his zeal to bear false testimony against me."

"If ever I told the truth in my life, my Lord Duke of Marchmont," exclaimed Wilson Stanhope, "it shall be told against you now, if her Majesty command me to speak out!"

"Let us hear the prisoner to the end," said Queen Indora, in the cold firm voice of authority.

"Next to your Majesty," continued the Duke of Marchmont, "sits a female who admits that she has lost her virtue, and that she has no claim to rank amongst the modest of her sex. It is easy for one who has been a willing paramour, to turn round upon him whom in the world's canting language she calls her seducer; and disappointed because I have not lavished gold upon her and established her in a palatial mansion as my acknowledged mistress, she is ready in her vindictive spirit to heap false calumnies upon my head."

"Villain that you are!" exclaimed Amy Sutton, her cheeks flushing with rage and indignation, and her eyes flashing fire; "you know that I rejected your overtures with scorn and contempt—and that you triumphed over me by the basest of satanic arts! But heaven be thanked, the day of your doom is arrived—and I am present to witness your downfall!"

"Let the prisoner proceed," said Queen Indora, again speaking in the voice of coldly calm authority.

"Turning to your Majesty's left hand," continued Marchmont, "I behold seated next to you a woman who lives upon her profligacy: and think you for a moment that the word of such a wretch would have the slightest weight with a jury of my countrymen in a legitimate Court of Justice? Let her proclaim her antecedents—let her character be unmasked as her face has ere now been unveiled; and who would attach the remotest credence to a syllable flowing from such polluted lips?"

"It is easy to use harsh epithets, my lord," exclaimed Mrs. Oxenden, her dark eyes flashing lightning even more vivid than those which the eyes of Amy Sutton had shot forth: "but abuse is not argument—and the testimony against you would be already overwhelming, were you not borne up by that very desperation which compels you to struggle unto the last!"

"As for the villain who is seated next," continued the Duke, his eyes now settling upon the Burker, "the gaol yawns for him; and it were an insult to any jury in this country to produce the testimony of such a man!"

"If it wasn't for such men as you, my lord," growled the Burker, "there would be fewer such men as me! Your day is gone by—and it's of no use your making long speeches and abusing them as you was accustomed to use as your tools."

"As for Madame Angelique," continued the Duke of Marchmont, who affected to turn away with loathing and disgust from the fierce regards of the Burker,—"as for Madame Angelique, *her* character befits her to take her place in this company with which your Majesty has chosen to surround yourself. The whole career of that vile Frenchwoman has been one of hardened iniquity; and she has accumulated wealth by means the most degrading, the most disgusting, the most abominable! Is it such testimony as hers that can all in a moment ruin the character of a nobleman bearing one of the proudest of British titles? Place that woman in a witness-box, and any judge will indignantly command her to stand down!—no jury would listen to her!"

"And yet, bad as I may have been," exclaimed Madame Angelique, "I have had the honour of reckoning the Duke of Marchmont among my most intimate friends!"

"I will now address myself to your Majesty," proceeded the Duke, who chose to have the appearance of disdaining to bandy a word with Madame Angelique. "I have spoken unreservedly of the characters of your witnesses; and your Majesty's own good sense must tell you that I have spoken only too truly. I will not pretend to fathom the purposes which you may have in view: but whatever they may be, you must confess by this time that you have failed in carrying them out. That I have been gay—perhaps dissipated,—that I have been a man of pleasure—all this it is not worth my while to deny: but on the other hand these things assuredly concern not yourself. That Mrs. Oxenden has been my mistress—that Amy Sutton has received me in her arms—or that my visits have been paid to the house of Madame Angelique, are facts which I might readily have admitted without the necessity of this dark parade and solemn ordeal. That my purse has been open to Mr. Stanhope—and that I have been plundered as well as personally maltreated by that villain who sits on your Majesty's left hand—are likewise facts. But that I have ever been their suborner or the instigator of their iniquities, is something too monstrous for belief. That I, so proudly placed, should have condescended to such folly, is repugnant to your Majesty's good sense. You see, Queen Indora, that I am addressing you with the respect that is due to your sex and to your rank. But let me warn your Majesty that it is no light deed on your part to adopt all these proceedings against an Englishman, however humble his rank might be: but when you reflect what I am—what my rank is—and that I am even exempt from the jurisdiction of the ordinary tribunals of my country—and if accused of misdeeds, can be tried only by my peers—you cannot shut out from yourself the fact that you have taken a most serious step in subjecting me to an ordeal which can end in naught. Therefore I demand that your Majesty at once restores me to that freedom which these myrmidons of your's"—and he glanced towards the Hindoos—"have so grossly violated."

As the reader may suppose, it cost the Duke of Marchmont no mean effort to maintain the demeanour which corresponded with the language that thus flowed from his lips, and which was so completely at variance with that inward consciousness of a thousand crimes that he experienced: but it was still by the very desperation of his circumstances that he was supported; and he was in a condition of the most awful suspense as to what might be coming next. Queen Indora listened to him with all that calm attention which a righteous judge bestows upon a captive who is accused: there was nothing however in her look nor bearing to indicate that his words had produced any effect upon her, either to make her think less than beforehand of the amount of evidence brought to bear against him, or to feel uneasy at the responsibility of the position in which she had placed herself. The Duke of Marchmont anxiously and eagerly watched to see what the effect of his speech might be; and more deeply sank his heart within him while he noticed how coldly firm and resolutely imperturbable were Queen Indora's looks. And then, too, the door of that inner chamber still stood half open; and the strong light was still shining forth; and there was a secret voice within the Duke's guilty soul, telling him that what he thus observed related to some fresh phase in the proceedings that were now in progress—but what it might be he could not possibly conjecture.

"I have heard you with attention, prisoner," said the Queen; "but it is unnecessary for me to offer the slightest comment upon your speech. Follow me."

She descended from her throne—grace and dignity in her movements—but a deep solemnity investing her as with a garment. Slowly she proceeded towards that half-open door—the Duke of Marchmont mechanically following. The Hindoo guards did not now accompany him: the witnesses remained stationary in their seats upon the dais. The Queen entered first into the room to which we have so often alluded; and the moment the Duke of Marchmont reached the threshold he beheld a spectacle which suddenly transfixed him with mingled awe, wonderment, and horror.

It was a much smaller room than that which had been fitted up for the tribunal: but the walls were likewise hung with black draperies. Upon a couch the corpse of Sagoonah was laid out. She seemed as if she were only sleeping—so serene was her aspect, and so completely was the freshness of the body preserved. There was in the atmosphere a perfume of drugs, which at once indicated the embalming process that had been adopted to ensure that preservation. A cap of snowy whiteness completely concealed the dead ayah's coal-black hair: her naked arms, stretched at her sides—not stiffly, but in a life-like manner—had rich bracelets upon them. Very beautiful appeared that corpse,—seeming as if the breath of life had only just passed out of it, and as if it had been surrendered up without a struggle: for immediately after the cold hand of death had touched Sagoonah, her features had settled down into that serenity which they now wore. Indeed, she looked not as if she were dead—but only sleeping after a severe indisposition which had spread an uniform pallor upon the natural duskiness of her complexion.

Four wax candles, as tall as those tapers which are seen on Catholic altars, shed their light upon the corpse, and produced that effulgence which streamed forth from the half-open door into the room fitted up as the tribunal. Powerful was the lustre, and solemnly grand was the effect thereof upon the body. It brought out the form of the dead Sagoonah into the strongest relief: it gave the animation of life to the skin; and it played upon her features as if they themselves were slightly moving with the presence of existence.

Amidst all the wildest conjectures which the Duke of Marchmont might have hazarded relative to the contents of this room, no possible surmise could have led him to anticipate the spectacle which he thus beheld. As we have said, therefore, he stood transfixed with mingled awe, wonderment, and horror: for it seemed as if death itself were now invoked to bear some kind of evidence against him. For upwards of a minute did Queen Indora suffer the scene to produce its fullest effect upon the prisoner; and then in a tone of authority she bade him advance further into the room. He obeyed her: she closed the door; and he was now alone with that royal lady and with the corpse of Sagoonah.

"My lord," said the Queen, in a voice that was low and most solemnly impressive, "you are not altogether innocent in respect to the causes which led to the premature death of the hapless Sagoonah. I will not however deny that her mind was already in a morbid state when you employed the vile Frenchwoman to become her temptress, and instigate her to the foulest deeds. Had it not been for this conduct on your part, Sagoonah might have lived. But step by step was she led on to that fearful climax which was the accomplishment of her doom. It was retribution that she met! The means which she had adopted to take my life at the instigation of your agent, became the source of her own death. The tragedy was a horrible one; and I do not hesitate to proclaim that Sagoonah was one of your victims. Oh! if you had never done aught but this, it were sufficient to fill your soul with a remorse that never in this life would be appeased! But greater still have been your crimes; and, as I ere now proclaimed, this is the hour in which they are all to be made known. Prisoner, look upon that corpse! It is the corpse of her who in the madness of feelings and passions which I shall not pause to describe, gave up your own brother to the dungeon-cell which he now tenants."

"My brother!" murmured the Duke of Marchmont, staggering at the words, as if they touched a chord which vibrated most painfully to his heart's core.

"Yes—your brother!" continued Queen Indora and now she bent the look of an avenging Nemesis upon the Duke of Marchmont. "Oh! think you that the proceedings of this night were ended when in the adjoining room I enumerated all your minor crimes,—crimes which though great in themselves, were nevertheless nothing to that which has yet to be proclaimed! And yet even *that* too was darkly hinted at—but not so darkly that it failed to touch your conscience! Do you not perceive that the finger of heaven has manifested itself in all the incidents and occurrences which have been hurrying you on towards the catastrophe? By the agent of your own villany were you stricken down, so that in the first moments of returning consciousness you might betray to that vile Frenchwoman—*another* agent of your iniquities—the tremendous secret which for nearly twenty years must have sat like a hideous nightmare upon your soul!"

It would be impossible to describe the ghastly horror which the countenance of the guilty Marchmont displayed, while Queen Indora was thus addressing him. He trembled from head to foot with a series of visible shudderings: the perspiration burst forth cold and clammy upon his brow: all his features were convulsed: it seemed as if he were about to fall down and writhe in fearfullest agony like a stricken serpent.

"But even without the testimony of that Frenchwoman," continued Indora, "was there a sufficiency of accumulated proofs to brand you with the full stigma of your enormous guilt. Do you doubt me? No!—you cannot! Yet step by step shall you pass through this ordeal. Come with me."

The Queen drew aside the sable drapery at the end of the room facing the door by which she and the Duke had entered from the tribunal; and another door enabled them to emerge upon the landing. This Indora traversed,—still followed by the Duke, who mechanically dragged himself along, but in a state of mind that it were impossible to describe. If ever a man felt that hell might be foretasted upon earth, and that it was possible to pass through a series of worldly horrors sufficient to prepare the soul for the torments of hereafter,—that man was the Duke of Marchmont. All his energies seemed now paralysed: he was obeying the Queen only as an automaton might have acted: his faculties were growing so numbed under the influence of intensest, most harrowing horror, that had she, being immortal or invulnerable, led the way into a fiery furnace, that wretched man would perforce have unconsciously and mechanically followed her.

She opened a door on the opposite side of the landing, and she conducted him into a little room

of which he seemed only to have a dim recollection, though nothing in this apartment was changed in respect to its appointments as he himself had for years known them. But, as we have already intimated, his thoughts were falling fast into confusion—not exactly with the madness of excitement, but with the stupor of an overwhelming consternation—a crushing dismay—a paralysing horror.

In this room to which Queen Indora now conducted the Duke of Marchmont, Mr. Armytage was seated. Candles were burning upon the table: Zoe's father was excessively pale—but there was a certain air of resolution in his looks, as if he knew beforehand what duty he had to perform, and was determined to accomplish it. He rose from his seat on the appearance of Indora, to whom he bowed with the profoundest respect. He then glanced at the Duke of Marchmont; and an expression passed over his features as if he were at the moment saying to himself, "The hour of that man is come!"

Indora closed the door; and without taking a seat, she at once said to Zoe's father, "Your name is not Armitage——it is Travers?"

"I have already admitted as much to your Majesty," replied the individual thus addressed; and his voice as well as his manner indicated the deepest respect towards that Sovereign lady.

The Duke of Marchmont now appeared to rally himself slightly for a moment; and he bent upon Travers a look of the most imploring entreaty: but Zoe's father seemed not to notice it.

"You were once the valet of this person?" continued Queen Indora, glancing for an instant at the Duke of Marchmont; "and you were at Oaklands when several long years ago an awful tragedy took place?"

"I was so, your Majesty," responded Travers: and a moan came forth from the throat of the wretched Marchmont.

"You remember the night when the late Duke of Marchmont was murdered?" continued Indora: "and you recollect that the faithful dog—no doubt in the attempt to save his beloved master from the assassin-blow, or else to punish him who dealt it—had torn off a piece of the garment worn at the time by that assassin?"

"All this I recollect, madam," replied Travers.

"Enough! enough!" wildly ejaculated Marchmont; and his eyes glared in their cavernous sockets. "Why revive the horrors of that night? Oh, madam! who are you that you have come as an avengeress?"

"I am here to proclaim innocence and to expose guilt," was the solemn answer which the Queen gave in interruption of the Duke's wild speech. "Travers, reply to me,—reply to me now as truthfully as you have previously made the confession! From whose garment was that piece rent off which the faithful dog bore in its mouth?"

"It was his!" responded Travers: and he pointed to Marchmont.

Hollow and dreadful was the moan which came slowly forth from the lips of the criminal: a dizziness spread itself before his vision; and he would probably have fainted, had not Queen Indora suddenly laid her hand lightly upon his arm, saying, "Come with me."

She opened an inner door; and Marchmont followed her. Another room was entered. This also was unchanged as to its usual appointments; and lights were burning there. Christian and Christina Ashton rose from their seats as the Queen entered: they were both very pale with suspense; for they knew that something was to happen which intimately regarded themselves—though they were utterly unconscious of what this might be. The Duke did not appear to take particular notice of them: his energies were again palsied—he again felt as if he were walking in a dream!

The Queen closed the door of this room, into which Armytage had not followed herself and Marchmont; and without an instant's delay, she snatched up an object which lay in a recess. This object gleamed bright across the vision of the wretched nobleman; and a cry of horror burst from his lips as he recognised it. It was a dagger,—that same dagger which has before been so often mentioned in the pages of our narrative.

"Behold," exclaimed Indora, as she raised the weapon in her right arm, while her form appeared to dilate, and her countenance assumed the expression of an avenging goddess,—"behold the dagger with which you took the life of your uncle!"—then pointing towards the twins with her left hand, she added, almost in the same breath, "And there behold the children of your murdered victim! In this youth you may see the rightful Duke of Marchmont!"

"O God!" moaned the wretched murderer: and overwhelmed by fearfullest horror, he sank upon his knees, while the twins clung to each other in wildest astonishment at the words which they had just heard from the lips of Queen Indora.

CHAPTER CXLVI.

CLOSE OF THE TRIBUNAL.

The five witnesses had remained in their seats upon the dais in the large apartment, hung with black, which had served as the tribunal. The two Hindoo guards had likewise continued in that room, mute and motionless: but their presence was sufficiently indicative of the inutility of any attempt being made to escape on the part of any of those witnesses whose own consciences might have excited apprehensions respecting what was to follow. The door communicating with the room in which Sagoonah's corpse was laid out, had been closed almost immediately after Indora led the prisoner thither; and thus that portion of the larger apartment was now involved in the same semi-obscurity that prevailed elsewhere. The black drapery covered that door which had recently stood half open: solemnly awful continued to be the aspect of the tribunal.

Presently, after nearly an hour's absence, Queen Indora returned. She came back alone: the prisoner was no longer with her. Her countenance was exceedingly pale—even more so than it was ere she quitted that apartment: for her feelings had been most powerfully wrought—and if she had experienced much satisfaction in successfully carrying out all her purposes, she had likewise felt much pain at the various details of their execution. Slowly she walked; and once more she ascended the throne. She did not immediately speak: a dead silence still prevailed for a few minutes, while all the witnesses contemplated her with anxiety and suspense. At length she broke that silence.

"The solemn object for which this tribunal was constituted," she said, "has been achieved; and by the merciful assistance of heaven I have become the instrument of accomplishing signal deeds this night. Know ye all who listen to me, that Bertram Vivian, now a prisoner in a felon's gaol in London, is innocent of that foul crime of murder which is charged against him, and under the imputation of which his good name has suffered for so many, many long years! It was not by *his* hand that his late uncle perished: the hand which dealt the assassin-blow was that of him who has ever since usurped the title of Duke of Marchmont!"

To Madame Angelique this fact was previously known: by Wilson Stanhope it had been for some time more than half suspected: Mrs. Oxenden, Amy Sutton, and the Burker were likewise but little astonished to hear the announcement that was just made.

"Yes," continued Queen Indora, "innocence is made apparent and guilt is exposed—the usurper is dispossessed of the title which he had so long fraudulently borne—and his ducal coronet will henceforth be worn by him to whom it descends as a lawful heritage. I allude not to Bertram Vivian. Most of you, if not all, are acquainted with the name of Christian Ashton; and that excellent, high-minded, well-principled youth is now Duke of Marchmont!"

Well as the listeners were prepared for the previous announcement,—yet utterly unexpected by them was the intelligence that had just fallen upon their ears. Astonishment was depicted upon their countenances: but there was at least one amongst them who was rejoiced at the good fortune of our young hero—and this was Amy Sutton.

"It now only remains for me," continued Queen Indora, "to announce my intentions to some who are here present, and to address a few parting words to the others. For the remainder of this night you will all be reconsigned to the places which you have respectively occupied since you became the inmates of Oaklands; and to-morrow you will all individually depart hence. Let me hope that the solemn scene which *you*, Mr. Stanhope, have this night beheld, will have upon you a salutary effect—and that henceforth you will strive by some honourable means to earn your livelihood, instead of selling yourself as the instrument of wrong-doing and crime, for patrician gold. That your hand is not stained with murder's blood, must rather be attributed to accidental circumstances than to a positive absence of a most criminal readiness on your part: for on the night when you drove your bargain with him who *then* bore the title of Duke of Marchmont, every syllable that passed between you was heard by Bertram Vivian; and it was *his* appearance at the casement behind the chair in which you were seated, that produced so tremendous an effect upon that criminal. To you, however, Mr. Stanhope, I need say no more—unless it be to repeat my earnest hope that all you have this night witnessed may have its salutary influence upon you. From these things learn that though wickedness may prosper for a time, yet that in the end this prosperity is certain to turn into the bitterest adversity."

The Queen paused for a few moments—while Wilson Stanhope, hanging down his head, seemed to experience all the effect which her impressive words were intended to convey.

"Amy Sutton," resumed the Queen, now addressing this young woman in a kind and compassionating tone, "you have been rendered the victim of a villain, and if your soul has cherished a poignant feeling of vengeance against him it is impossible to blame you. You have now witnessed his downfall; and that feeling must be thereby appeased. In this native land of your's it is scarcely probable that you could henceforth experience happiness. In a short time I shall return to my own country; and I propose that you should follow me thither. I offer you about my own person a situation of confidence and emolument; and your welfare shall be in my charge. Your sister may accompany you if you desire it, and if you think that by removing her from the scene of those temptations which have proved fatal to her honour, she will be led to repentance and to a better course of life. To my person, however, she cannot be attached: but when I reach the capital city of my own kingdom, I will place her in some position that may afford her the opportunity of eating the bread of honest industry. The frail and erring Marion was yesterday removed from the house in which she has been dwelling in dishonour; and she is now the occupant of a humbler home, where you may join her until the period for my departure to my own native clime shall arrive."

Amy Sutton threw herself at the feet of Queen Indora, whose hand she pressed in gratitude to her lips; and she thankfully accepted all the propositions which had just been made.

"To you, Mrs. Oxenden," continued the Queen, "I can have but little to say—indeed nothing more than to reiterate the hope which I have expressed to Mr. Stanhope that the scene of this night may have a beneficial influence upon you. You will be restored to freedom: to-morrow you will go forth into the world again; and if you be wise you will endeavour by the respectability of your future career to make as much atonement as possible for your past misdeeds. The young man on whom you have been lavishing the gold which you received as the price of your own infamy, has been wounded in a duel which he himself provoked: but his injury was slight—and no disagreeable consequences will ensue. On the contrary, that incident has been productive of beneficial results for Alexis Oliver. He has been made to feel the degradation of the position in which he was living with you: he is reconciled to his family; and opportunities will be afforded him of pursuing an honourable career. You must not therefore hope that the object of your infatuation will be restored to you;—and now once again do I express the hope that your own conduct will experience an alteration for the better."

Mrs. Oxenden listened with a subdued sullenness to the speech which thus flowed from Queen Indora's lips; and perhaps she would have given some insolent reply if she had dared. But she was in awe of that illustrious lady who exercised the power as well as manifested the inclination to reward or to punish: though as for penitence, Mrs. Oxenden possessed not a heart that was susceptible of the influences which might lead to such contrition.

"As for you, man of many crimes," proceeded Indora, now addressing herself to the Burker, "it were an outrage against society to leave you without chastisement. If you were handed over to the grasp of your country's law, your life would be forfeited, and you would expiate on the scaffold the numerous iniquities of which you have been guilty. In my estimation, however, the punishment of death is odious; and I hold the opinion that the great criminal should be treated as a ferocious beast, to be confined within bars that he may not follow the bent of his brutal bloodthirsty instincts. It is my purpose to transport you with the least possible delay to my own native country; and there you will be confined in a fortress for the remainder of your life. In pronouncing this punishment, I must remind you that you have to congratulate yourself on escaping that doom which would be yours if you were to be subjected to the ordeal of British justice."

The Burker made no reply: but his ferocious countenance expressed the utmost satisfaction at the intelligence that he was to be dealt with in a manner that would leave him in possession of life.

"You, vile woman," proceeded Queen Indora, now addressing herself to Madame Angelique, "have committed crimes which cannot be left unpunished. If not a murderess, in fact, you have been so in heart: for deliberately and in cold blood did you instigate the unfortunate Sagoonah to make attempts upon my life. You have amassed a fortune by a career of infamy; and you shall not be left in the enjoyment of it. To-morrow, before you are restored to freedom, must you bequeath nine-tenths of your ill-gotten riches to the charitable institutions of the British metropolis; and on this condition only shall you be liberated. If you refuse, the law shall take cognisance of your crimes—the penalty of which will be transportation to a distant settlement!"

Madame Angelique began to weep, moan, and lament: but Queen Indora remained unmoved by the vile woman's grief.

"You, Mr. Stanhope—and you, Mrs. Oxenden," resumed her Majesty, "have sufficient reasons to maintain a profound secrecy in respect to the transactions of this night. As for that man there"—thus alluding to the Burker—"care will be taken that he shall have no opportunity of revealing in this country whatsoever he may have seen or heard within these walls. I know," continued Indora, now again fixing her eyes on Madame Angelique, "that in passing sentence upon *you*, I have usurped an authority derived only from the law of morality and not from the law of this country's code: but you will not dare to proclaim to the world this incident of the night's transactions. And with regard to all the rest, you will for your own sake observe a similar secrecy: for remember that though you may cease to be my prisoner, you will not cease to be amenable to the law for your past crimes!"

Having thus spoken, Qusen Indora descended from the throne, and issued from the apartment. Immediately afterwards Purvis, accompanied by several domestics of the household, entered that room. The two Hindoo guards conducted the Burker to a subterranean place, in which he had been confined ever since he became a captive at Oaklands: the domestics led off Mrs. Oxenden, Madame Angelique, and Wilson Stanhope to the chambers which they respectively occupied: but no such *surveillance* was necessary in regard to Amy Sutton.

The Queen, on leaving the tribunal, proceeded to that room where the usurper Duke of Marchmont had been confronted with Travers—or Armytage, as we had better continue to call him, inasmuch as he preserved his assumed denomination. On the entrance of Indora, Armytage rose from his seat, and made a profound obeisance.

"Every promise which has been held out to you," said her Majesty, "shall be faithfully kept. The wretched criminal whose gold succeeded in bribing you to silence in respect to his guilt, has confessed his enormous crime. But you have now to learn that there was lawful issue from the marriage of the late Duke and Duchess; and that amiable brother and sister whom you have so often seen at your daughter's house, are the twin offspring of that marriage."

Nothing could exceed the astonishment of Armytage on hearing this intelligence; and when the first sense of wonderment was passed, he clasped his hands, exclaiming, "Oh! how will they ever forgive me for having kept a secret the revelation of which might long ago have given them their rights?"

"No," answered the Queen: "that revelation would merely have proved the usurping Duke's guilt and the innocence of Bertram Vivian. But not until very lately was it known that Christian and Christina Ashton were the offspring of the ducal house of Marchmont. On them, therefore, your long-maintained silence in respect to the real murderer's crime has wrought no injury. It is the pardon of Bertram Vivian which you have to ask; and that forgiveness will be accorded. The results of my plans have been such that a complete exposure of all the details of the past will be avoided; and your name need not be mentioned in a manner to make your amiable daughter blush for it. She need never know that you have for years been cognisant of the great guilt of him who has this night been led to confess everything. And if so much care has been taken in respect to your reputation, it is not for your own sake—but it is for the sake of your amiable Zoe, whom Christina loves so well! To-morrow you will be restored to freedom; and may the rest of your life be passed in a manner to be contemplated with satisfaction. You go forth into the world again as a man freed from debt—I may say as a rich man. Your daughter's fortune, which you had squandered, is replaced: you will not have to blush nor lament when you again meet her. It will be your own fault if you do not henceforth live in comfort and prosperity; and should you by renewed speculations reduce yourself to distress, you must not hope that a helping hand will again be stretched out to save you."

Armytage fell at the Queen's feet, pouring forth his gratitude for her kindness, and vehemently protesting that his experiences of speculation had been far too bitter not to afford a lesson that he would never forget.

Indora issued from that room; and on the landing she met Mr. Coleman, the solicitor, who was just descending the staircase leading to the floor above. He held in his hand a folded document; and presenting it to the Queen, he said, "Madam, I have the pleasure of placing in your hands this complete confession of the dying criminal."

Indora took the paper; and opening it, she glanced at the signature, which was tremulously written. The names of Mr. Coleman, a physician, and of Purvis, the steward, were appended as those of the witnesses. That document was the proof of Bertram Vivian's innocence. The Queen's aim was now accomplished: the hope which had long inspired her was fulfilled: the object for which she had toiled, was achieved! The stigma was removed from the name of him whom she had so long and so devotedly loved! She had been sustained by a wondrous courage throughout all the manifold proceedings which had been leading to this result: but now that it was accomplished a sudden reaction took place within her—the joy of success was almost more than she could endure—she staggered against the wall for support—she felt as if she were about to faint. Mr. Coleman hastened to procure a glass of water; and when the Queen had partaken of the refreshing beverage, she was revived.

She entered an adjacent apartment, attended by Mr. Coleman; and she said to him, "Is it, then, as we conjectured?—has the shock been too much——"

"It is so, your Majesty," answered the solicitor. "The physician declares that the unhappy man cannot survive many hours."

"And his wife—the unfortunate Lavinia—she who can no longer be spoken of as the Duchess of Marchmont?"—and tears of compassion trickled down Indora's cheeks as she gave utterance to these words.

"The unfortunate lady of whom your Majesty speaks," rejoined Mr. Coleman, "is kneeling by the bed-side of her husband. The village clergyman has just arrived; and the perishing sinner is joining with him in prayer——"

"But Lavinia?" said the Queen, in accents of most mournful inquiry.

"That lady who is so deeply to be pitied," responded Coleman, "seems as if she likewise had received her death-blow. She is overwhelmed with grief and horror. She looks as if she were in a dream—in a kind of half-stupor which numbs the intensity of her affliction. She can scarcely believe that all she has heard is true. Was it not a distressing scene, madam, when your Majesty broke to the unhappy lady the terrific intelligence?"

"It was a scene," answered Indora, shuddering at the bare recollection, "which I never, never can forget,—a scene which will often hereafter haunt me; for the wild shriek which rang forth from Lavinia's lips is still sounding in my ears. Oh, yes—it was a frightful scene! And yet I was in a measure prepared for it: for I had previously granted the unhappy lady an interview, before the proceedings in the tribunal commenced. And in that interview I had endeavoured to prepare Lavinia's mind as much as possible for something dreadful. But, Oh! when I sought her a second time, and began breaking the frightful intelligence as delicately as I could——Oh! Mr. Coleman, the spectacle of anguish that I witnessed cannot possibly be described! Ah! it is terrible to reflect that in performing an act of justice—in proclaiming wrong and making right come uppermost—the consequences should redound with such appalling power upon the head of an innocent person!"

The Queen wiped away the tears from her eyes; and after a brief pause, Mr. Coleman inquired, "Where are that brother and sister?—where are those whom we must now call the Duke of Marchmont and Lady Christina Vivian?"

"I left them alone together after that dreadful scene when their wretched relative fell at their feet and confessed his stupendous guilt. He was removed to the chamber up-stairs; and then I said enough to my young friends to make them comprehend how it was that they belonged to the ducal house of Marchmont, and that Christian was now the bearer of the proud title. Yes—I left that young brother and sister alone together, that they might weep for joy and for grief in each other's arms,—for joy at this wondrous change in their circumstances, and for grief as they thought of their perished parents. I will now seek them; and before I retire to rest, I will likewise see that unhappy lady the idea of whose grief fills my own heart with woe."

"And I, with your Majesty's permission, will at once repair to London," said Mr. Coleman, "to communicate the results of this night's proceedings to him who is so deeply interested in them."

"But not until his unhappy brother shall have breathed his last," rejoined the Queen, "must you proclaim to the world how guilt has been made manifest and how innocence is vindicated."

Mr. Coleman bowed in acknowledgment of Indora's command; and he then took a respectful leave of the Queen, who forthwith proceeded to the apartment where she had left Christian and Christina nearly an hour back.

CHAPTER CXLVII.

DEATH.

It were scarcely possible to convey an idea of the feelings experienced by the twins on contemplating their suddenly altered position. That Christian should be the bearer of a ducal title—that Christina should now have a patrician prefix to her name—were facts which they could scarcely comprehend. They who had believed themselves to belong to a family in the middle-class of life, had now been told that they bore one of the loftiest names in the British Peerage. Moreover, they who not a very long while back had known the pinching need of penury, and had moistened poverty's crust with their tears, were to be now surrounded by almost boundless wealth and to be in the possession of immense means of doing good.

As yet they were unacquainted with all the minute details which so intimately concerned the mystery of their birth: but Queen Indora had told them sufficient to make them aware that they were the children of that Duke of Marchmont of whose murder they had read and heard, and at which they had shuddered,—the children of that Duchess Eliza for whose sorrows they had wept though at the same time believing her to have been the guilty paramour of Bertram Vivian. But now they knew that their mother was innocent—that neither previous to her departure from Oaklands, nor subsequent to it, had she deviated from the path of rectitude—and that though she and Bertram had loved fondly and devotedly, yet that this love of theirs had not betrayed them into error. Christian and Christina could therefore look without shame upon the memory of their unhappy mother: but not the less painful were the tears which they shed when reflecting how much that poor mother must have suffered ere she sank into her nameless grave in an obscure village churchyard in a distant county! And the twins wept painfully too as they thought of their unhappy sire, who when wandering forth in his despair, and in the silence of night, had met his death from the hand of an assassin. These were painful retrospections truly; and mingling with the consciousness of rank and wealth and brilliant position, they taught the twins the world's invariable lesson—that there is no perfect happiness upon earth, and that however high the chalice may be filled with honey, there is to be at least one drop of gall mingled with its contents.

And now too Christian and Christina were enabled to regard as a relation that noble-minded man whom, as Mr. Redcliffe, they had known as a friend and a benefactor: and Oh! how they rejoiced that his innocence had been made manifest. But here again was the gall mingling with the honey: for if on the one hand the startling revelations of this night had rendered them aware that they had a relative of whom they could be proud, at the same time they learnt that they had another of whose crimes they could only think with blended distress and horror. Yes—bitterness was mingled with the sweetness of the twins' reflections: but still there was happiness for them,—happiness for that beautifully handsome young man who now bore a ducal title—happiness for that maiden of transcending loveliness whose name a patrician dignity graced! And at one time this young man had served in a humble capacity the very kinsman who bore that usurped title,—the very kinsman who enjoyed the wealth that was now to be all Christian's own! But, Ah! if there were one reason more than another for which our young hero rejoiced in the wondrous change that had taken place in his circumstances, it was that he could place the coronet of a Duchess upon the brow of that charming Isabella who had loved so faithfully, so devotedly, so unselfishly.

The twins embraced each other over and over again when they were left alone together by Queen Indora: they mingled their tears as they spoke of their perished parents—and they smiled upon each other in mutual congratulations for the bounties which all in a moment seemed to be showering upon their heads. Then they exchanged solemn looks; and they shuddered simultaneously, and Christian drew his sister closer to him, as they spoke in half-hushed and awe-inspired whispers of the wretched man whom they had ere now seen kneeling, crushed and overwhelmed, at their feet: but again they smiled as they exultingly exclaimed, "Thank heaven, *his* innocence is made manifest!"

And though neither at the moment mentioned the name, yet in the sympathy and unison of their hearts did they mutually comprehend to whom the allusion pointed—that benefactor whom they had known as Mr. Redcliffe, and whom they had subsequently learnt to be Lord Clandon or Bertram Vivian, and who was now the inmate of a felon's gaol—but a gaol from which he would shortly be released! And Oh! what a deep debt of gratitude did the twins feel that they owed to that high-minded, noble-hearted Queen who had toiled on so laboriously, so perseveringly, and so arduously, to bring all matters to that crisis which should at the same instant afford the opportunity for proving Bertram Vivian's innocence, and for proclaiming that they themselves were scions of the ducal house of Marchmont. But on the other hand how immense was the compassion which Christian and Christina experienced for the unfortunate Lavinia! —that lady whom they knew to be so innocent and so amiable, and who had proved a ministering angel to the husband at whose hands she had sustained so much wrong in so many different ways!

The twins had been left alone together for nearly an hour ere Queen Indora returned to them as morning was advancing. But during that hour how much had they to think of—how much to talk of—what subjects of wonder and horror to contemplate—what contrasts to draw between the past and the present—what tears of sweetness and sadness to shed in alternate showers!

And now the Queen came back to them; and Christina threw herself into the arms of that Sovereign lady who had never treated her as an inferior, but always as a friend: and Christian, taking her Majesty's hand, pressed it to his lips. They sat down to converse together; and the Queen communicated to them the happy intelligence that Mr. Coleman had set off to London to report the issue of all these proceedings at Oaklands to him whom they so nearly concerned; so that our hero and heroine knew that not many hours would elapse ere Bertram Vivian would be relieved from all suspense, and would have the joyous consciousness that his innocence would be triumphantly made apparent to the whole world.

The discourse of Queen Indora and the twins was interrupted by the entrance of Purvis, the faithful old steward, who came as the bearer of a special request to him whom he now for the first time saluted as Duke of Marchmont.

"My lord," he said, in a voice tremulous with emotion, "permit an old man who liked and loved you when little dreaming who you really were, to offer his felicitations on your attainment of your just rights. And in you, lady," continued Purvis, turning towards Christina, "I recognise a resemblance to your poor mother."

The steward, the Queen, and the twins were all much affected; and the two latter grasped the old man by the hand.

"I come," said Purvis, after a pause, during which he to a certain extent regained his self-possession, "with a message from that dying man——"

"If he wish to see me," said Christian, "I will go to him! If he be penitent—truly and sincerely penitent—I will not refuse him my forgiveness, although he took my father's life!"

"And your ladyship," said the old steward, again addressing himself to Christina—"will you accompany my lord your brother?—for the dying man implores the pardon of you both!"

"Yes—I will go," replied our generous-hearted heroine.

Queen Indora glanced approvingly on the twins; and they issued from the room, followed by Purvis. They ascended the staircase: they paused for a moment at the door of the chamber in which lay the dying nobleman; and in the sympathetic unison of their hearts they exchanged looks which were as much as to imply that they both felt the necessity of conquering all repugnances as much as possible, in order that they might smooth the pillow of the dying penitent.

Purvis gently opened the door; and the twins entered. By the couch knelt Lavinia, her face resting upon her hands; and by her side knelt the village clergyman. The physician was standing close by the head of the bed, with a solemn expression of countenance: for though accustomed to look upon death-scenes, yet this one was attended with circumstances extraordinarily calculated to strike the heart with awe. But the dying nobleman himself——Oh! what pen can describe the ghastliness of his countenance—the utter misery of his looks? His hair which had only recently begun to turn grey, had actually grown many shades whiter during the last few hours. Instead of having the appearance of a man in the prime of life, he looked as if at least sixty winters had passed over his head.

Lavinia and the clergyman, upon hearing the door gently close, quitted their kneeling postures; and tears gushed forth from the eyes of both Christian and Christina on catching the first glimpse of the countenance of her who had so long borne the title of Duchess of Marchmont. All vital tint seemed to have fled from that countenance: even the very lips were of marble paleness. Its expression was so haggard, so care-worn, so woe-begone, that even if she herself had been criminal it would have excited pity: but innocent in every respect as they knew her to be, it filled their hearts with anguish to look upon the face of that afflicted lady. The clergyman—a venerable man—bowed to the twins with the profoundest respect, and contemplated them with a mournful interest: for he had known their parents—and he was indebted to their father for the incumbency which he held. The physician likewise saluted the young Duke of Marchmont and Lady Christina Vivian: but the dying nobleman covered his face with his thin wan hands, and groaned audibly.

Lavinia tried to speak—but she could not: her voice was choked with the intensity of her feelings: yet her eyes eloquently proclaimed the gratitude she experienced for this visit of pardon which they paid to her perishing husband. As for that man himself—he also tried to give utterance to some words; and he essayed likewise to raise himself up in the couch: but the power of speech seemed to have gone from his palsied throat, and that of motion from his tranced limbs. Another attempt on Lavinia's part to say something to the young pair, proved ineffectual: for the first sounds of the syllables that wavered on her lips, died away in a spasm of intensest agony which excruciated her whole frame. She burst into tears: and seizing the hand of each of the twins, she pressed them by turns to her lips. Christina threw her arms round Lavinia's neck and wept passionately upon her bosom: while Christian tremulously murmured, "We are here to assure your husband of forgiveness!"

"Oh, this is more than I could have expected!" moaned the dying nobleman, now finding utterance for a few broken sentences. "I who have been so wicked—so deeply stained with guilt—I who deprived your father of his life—Oh, Christian!—Christina!—it is more than I ought to have hoped!—But, my God! even now that you are here, I cannot look you in the face!"

And again did the wretched man cover his countenance with his hands.

"If your penitence be sincere—as I trust and hope and believe it is," said Christian, in a soft voice, "receive the assurance of my pardon—and that of my sister!"

"*Can* you forgive me? is it possible that you can forgive me?" asked the dying man. "Oh, what hearts do you both possess! It must be a paradise to have such hearts as yours: but mine cannot understand them! Yes, Christian—my penitence is sincere. O God! with such remorse as this, how can there be otherwise than contrition? My confession is made: you are Duke of Marchmont. I need not ask that you and your amiable sister will be kind to my poor wife——"

"Think not of me, Hugh!" gasped forth the afflicted Lavinia. "I shall not long survive you. I feel it *here!*"—and with an expression of ineffable anguish on her countenance, she pressed her hand upon her heart.

"Christian, you have forgiven me," continued the dying nobleman, in a hollow voice; and at the same time his equally hollow eyes were turned towards our hero; "and such generosity on your part will experience its reward. The same with Christina. Oh, if I dared bless you——But no, no! blessings from my lips——"

"Remember," said Christian, "that a Redeemer died to save us from the consequences of our sins; and for our blessed Saviour's sake the mercy of God is illimitable!"

"Oh, these are words of solace, coming from *your* lips!" murmured the dying man: and he made a movement as if he would take the hand of our young hero.

"It is a sign of forgiveness which from my heart I afford you!" said Christian: and he at once gave his hand to the perishing penitent.

At the same moment a change came suddenly and visibly over the countenance of the latter: its paleness grew corpse-like—the eyes appeared to sink deeper into their sockets—some words to which he could not give audible utterance, wavered upon his lips: then came a low moan, followed by a gasp—and next by a strong spasm, which seemed to thrill painfully through the penitent's form—and then all was over!

There was a profound and solemn silence for the space of several moments; but Lavinia appeared uncertain relative to the supreme fact. She gazed with a dismay—half wild, half awe-felt—upon the countenance of her husband: then she swept her looks around upon those who stood with her by the side of the couch; and she read in their faces the truth to which she had striven to close her convictions. A piercing cry burst from her lips; and whether she fell forward or threw herself upon the corpse, was not apparent: but there she lay, motionless as he upon whose form her head rested. For several instants those who beheld the unfortunate Lavinia, fancied that she was abandoning herself to a profound and absorbing woe which had supervened on that sudden access of wild despair: but as she moved not, and as not so much as even a sob or a sigh was wafted to their ears, they grew alarmed. They raised her: there was a small pool of blood on the counterpane at the spot where her mouth had rested; and the physician pronounced her to be a corpse.

Deeply, deeply affected were the twins, as they suffered themselves to be led forth from that chamber of death. They rejoined the Queen, to whom they communicated the details of the sad scene they had witnessed; and Indora mournfully remarked that it were better for Lavinia to have died thus, than to have lived to deplore a husband who was unworthy of her lamentation. Her Majesty and the twins retired to their respective chambers to rest for a few hours: but sleep closed not the eyes of either of them.

The man who had so long borne the title of the Duke of Marchmont, was now no more: he had passed beyond that sphere in which his crimes would have rendered him amenable to human laws—he had gone to that other world; in which he was to appear in the presence of a more dread tribunal. But his wife, who had been an angel on earth, had gone at the same time to be an angel in heaven; and it was a touching reflection, made by the twins to each other, that the hapless Lavinia had taken that eternal flight at such a moment to intercede at the footstool of eternal grace for the man to whom, notwithstanding all his crimes, her heart was devoted. It was now communicated to all the domestics and to the surrounding tenantry that our young hero was Duke of Marchmont. He received their respectful homage with a becoming modesty; and he gave orders that the funeral of the deceased husband and wife should be conducted with all possible privacy. They were interred in the family vault of the village church; and thus terminated the career of a man whose life was full of misdeeds, and of a lady whose soul was spotless.

Wilson Stanhope, Mrs. Oxenden, and Armytage were released from their captivity, according to the Queen's promise; and they all three had their own good reasons for maintaining a profound silence in respect to the transactions in which they had played a part at Oaklands. Madame Angelique executed a deed, which Mr. Coleman drew up, transferring the bulk of her property to certain charitable institutions in the metropolis; and she was then suffered to take her departure from Oaklands, bitterly repenting that she had ever mixed herself up in the affairs of the late owner of that mansion. The Burker was conveyed away secretly, and under circumstances of all possible precaution, by the two Hindoos; and in a deep disguise, as well as under a feigned name, he was placed on board a ship bound for the East Indies. The embalmed corpse of Sagoonah was interred in the churchyard of the village of Oaklands.

We have purposely avoided entering as yet into any details calculated to clear up the mysteries attending the fate of the Duchess Eliza after her flight from Oaklands, as well as the birth of her twin children; because we shall presently have to describe the whole of the evidence which was given before a Committee of Privileges appointed by the House of Lords to investigate the claim of Christian to the Marchmont Peerage. But before commencing those important explanations, we will lay before the reader the substance of the confession made by the deceased nobleman, in the presence of Mr. Coleman, Purvis, and the physician, and which the solicitor duly committed to paper. In doing this, we shall have to make repeated references to the opening chapters of our narrative; and it would therefore be as well if the reader would here cast a glance over those earliest portions of the story which related the loves of Bertram and Eliza.

Soon after the marriage of the Duke of Marchmont and Miss Lacey, they went abroad on a continental tour, which lasted for several months; and they then returned to Oaklands, in the autumn of the year 1829. There they were joined by Lord Clandon and Bertram Vivian. The singular behaviour of Eliza and Bertram to each other, mystified Lord Clandon, who was perfectly ignorant of the loves of his brother and Eliza when they were at Oxford—as indeed the Duke himself likewise was. Lord Clandon fancied that Mrs. Bailey, as a relation of the youthful Duchess, might possibly be in her Grace's confidence, and therefore be enabled to throw some light on the matter which thus bewildered him. He succeeded, as the reader will recollect, in worming out of Mrs. Bailey the entire narrative of the past. Devilish ideas were thereby engendered in Lord Clandon's brain. He was steeped to the very lips in debt; and he knew perfectly well that generous though his uncle the Duke was, he would not disburse the large sum that was required to clear him of his liabilities. Besides, he constantly trembled lest his creditors should expose the state of his affairs to the Duke,—who, being a man imbued with the highest sense of honour in pecuniary matters, was quite capable of discarding him altogether and withdrawing his countenance from him. The Duke's marriage had been deeply galling to Lord Clandon; and the youth of the Duchess seemed to promise that it might not be unproductive of issue. Thus if an heir were born to the title and estates of Marchmont, farewell to the last hope of Lord Clandon, who would be doomed to remain a poor Peer, with an income of scarcely a couple of thousand a-year, and with debts to ten times that amount.

His lordship was therefore inspired with evil thoughts by the narrative he had received from Mrs. Bailey's lips. At that time, however, he entertained not the slightest idea of assassinating his uncle: all he aimed at was so to direct his machinations that the Duke should at once divorce himself from the Duchess and thereby deprive himself of the hope of having legitimate progeny from his marriage. It was of the highest importance for Clandon to achieve this object: for the success of the measure would leave him still heir-presumptive to the title and estates of Marchmont; and so long as he had there prospects before him, he could raise money and satisfy his creditors.

He therefore lost no time in putting his evil projects in a train of operation. He threw himself in the way of the Duke, and insinuated himself into his Grace's confidence. Thoroughly versed in all the arts of hypocrisy, he affected a mild, submissive, and deferential manner while proffering his insidious advice; and at the same time he played his part so well that he seemed to be as much swayed by affection towards his brother as by a respectful esteem for the Duchess, and by love, gratitude, and veneration for his uncle. The Duke listened to him with a thankful confidence; while Clandon affected to believe that the conduct of Eliza and Bertram towards each other arose from an excess of prudence on the part of the former, and an extreme sensitiveness on that of the latter. He proceeded to recommend that the Duke should throw Bertram and Eliza more together—and that he should afford them opportunities of cultivating a friendly intimacy. The bait took: the Duke followed his villanous nephew's insidious advice; and the results were as Clandon had foreseen.

He continuously watched the proceedings of Bertram and Eliza: he saw how their manner changed towards each other, and that all their love was reviving in their hearts. Then it was that he penned an anonymous letter, in a feigned hand, addressed to the Duke, and the contents of which were to the effect that Bertram was dishonouring him. The Duke watched the movements of his young wife and Bertram; and he beheld that embrace in which the latter passionately and impetuously folded the Duchess. The reader will recollect the scene which ensued. Bertram fled to the village inn, having previously encountered his brother Lord Clandon, to whom he imparted what had occurred; and the insi-

JANE BARCLAY.
(When in the service of the Duchess Eliza.)

mate form of the Duchess was borne into the mansion. The Duke ordered Mrs. Bailey's carriage to be immediately got in readiness to take the Duchess away. Lord Clandon inwardly chuckled at the success which was thus attending his schemes: but he affected the utmost sympathy with his uncle, and even spoke as if he were inclined to plead for his brother. The Duchess sent a letter by one of her maids to Mrs. Bailey, with a request that she would present it to the Duke, for whom it was intended. Lord Clandon volunteered to perform this office; and he entered the apartment in which the Duke had shut himself. He dared not conceal the fact that he had been entrusted with a letter, for fear it should subsequently transpire by some other means: but while appearing to study the language of conciliation, he in reality so framed his speech that it tended to aggravate and embitter his uncle more than ever, if possible, against the Duchess. He thus accomplished the result at which he aimed: for the Duke positively refused to open his wife's letter. However, on issuing forth from the Duke's presence, Clandon assured the maid that the Duke *had* read the letter, but that his resolve was not to be shaken. The Duchess seeing that her last hope was gone, then left the house.

In the meanwhile Bertram from the village inn had despatched a letter to the Duke; and when Lord Clandon joined him at that tavern, Bertram informed him of the circumstance. The Duke received the letter, the contents of which filled him with a bewildering uncertainty. After all, Eliza might be innocent! He sent for Jane, her Grace's principal lady's-maid; and from her lips he heard that the Duchess had called God to witness her innocence, previous to her departure. Jane moreover informed the Duke that her Grace's writing-desk contained certain documents to which she had made allusion in the letter sent by the hand of Lord Clandon. The Duke flew to his wife's boudoir—opened the writing-desk—and read all the letters which gave him a complete insight into the loves of Bertram and Eliza at Oxford. Then a veil fell from his eyes; and he believed that his wife was innocent. He rushed forth from the boudoir, and encountered Lord Clandon, who had just come back from the village after his interview with his brother. There was then a horrible clearness in the mind of the Duke; and the conviction smote him that Lord Clandon had been playing a most perfidious game. He bade Clandon follow him into the drawing-room; and there he at once accused him in a manner which made Hugh imagine that his uncle had by some means acquired a positive knowledge of his treachery. He was filled with confusion: the Duke beheld his guilt depicted upon his countenance; and he abruptly quitted his nephew in a way which testified all his displeasure.

Lord Clandon was horrified on thus beholding a gulf suddenly opening at his own feet and threatening to swallow him up. All his schemes appeared to be redounding with overwhelming violence against himself. The Duke would take back his wife, and would restore his confidence to Bertram! Ruin and disgrace would remain as the portion for the guilty Clandon! Then it was that in the utter desperation of his soul the horrible thought of assassinating his uncle flashed into his brain. It speedily settled and acquired consistency there: his purpose was fixed. But in order to play a part which should eventually avert or disarm suspicion, he affected to be deeply anxious that the Duchess should be found; and he offered a reward to any individual who should discover her retreat. He went out as if to search for the Duchess—but it was in reality to look for his uncle. He however failed in falling in with the Duke; and he returned to Oaklands. Shortly afterwards his Grace reappeared: but Lord Clandon took good care not to throw himself in his uncle's way. From his valet Travers he learnt that the Duke had gone out again. This was past one in the morning; and Lord Clandon pretended that he should retire to rest,—bidding Travers call him early that he might get on horseback and renew the search after the Duchess. When Travers had retired, Lord Clandon stole down from his chamber; and provided with a pistol, and with a dagger which he had taken from Bertram's room, he sallied forth from the mansion. His search on this occasion was not a long one: for he met his uncle close by the pond in the bye-lane. The Duke was indignant on recognising Clandon; and he turned away from him. The next moment the fatal blow was dealt: the murderer's hand plunged the dagger deep down between his uncle's shoulders. With a savage howl the Duke's dog Pluto sprang at the assassin; and Clandon instantaneously discharged his pistol. The faithful animal had caught the murderer by the skirt of his coat, and Clandon did not perceive that a piece had been torn off. The dog fell wounded; and the murderer rushed away. Regaining the mansion, he stole up to his own chamber—and tossed off his clothes, still unsuspecting, in the horrible confusion of his mind, that a fragment of his coat had remained in the dog's mouth. Soon after six o'clock the servants of the household were again up; and on the portals being opened, the wounded Pluto dragged himself in. Lord Clandon, hearing the sounds of many voices down-stairs, hastily rose from his bed, and dressed himself in a different suit from that which he had worn at the time of the murder; for he naturally studied every circumstance to prove that he had actually been in bed for the last few hours. On descending to the hall, he found the servants surrounding the dog, from whose mouth the piece of cloth had dropped. Travers was there at the time: but on observing that fragment of cloth, he was smitten with a suspicion—and he rushed up to his master's room. There he found the coat which Lord Clandon had thrown off; and while he was yet examining it, that nobleman himself entered the chamber. He saw that it would be impossible to conceal his guilt from his valet; and with a haggard, ghastly look, he said, "Travers, be silent—be secret—and your fortune is made!"

Travers bowed in silence: but by his own looks he showed that he understood his master's meaning, and that he might be fully relied upon. The corpse of the Duke was found; and by the devilish ingenuity of Lord Clandon, all circumstances were so well combined as to throw the whole weight of suspicion upon his brother Bertram.

From these explanations the reader can be at no loss to comprehend the details of the confession made by the murderer on his death-bed; and which were duly taken down by Mr. Coleman in the presence of Purvis and the physician.

CHAPTER CXLVIII.

LORD CLANDON.

We need hardly inform the reader that immense was the public excitement when it became reported abroad that Lord Clandon was innocent of the murder of his uncle many years back—that he who had so long borne the ducal title since that tragic event, was the veritable assassin — that having in a last illness made a full confession, he had prematurely paid the debt of nature—that his unhappy wife, as innocent as *he* was guilty, had perished through affliction at the same time—and that a youthful heir had been found for the title of Marchmont. But it did not transpire by what means these revelations and these circumstances had been brought about: the secret of Queen Indora's arrangements in respect to the tribunal, was faithfully kept by the old steward Purvis and the other domestics at Oaklands who had been necessarily privy to those measures.

The Queen and the twins returned to London: Christina remained with her Majesty—but Christian, by the advice of Mr. Coleman, and likewise at the earnest recommendation of his cousin Lord Clandon, proceeded to take up his abode at Marchmont House in Belgrave Square. There, at a mansion in which he had formerly filled a comparatively humble position, he was now received as a lord and a master; and the carriages of the highest aristocracy were continuously driving up to the door that cards might be left for the young Duke of Marchmont.

The day for Lord Clandon's trial was now at hand: the law required that this ceremony should take place, though every one knew that it must prove a mere matter of form, and that the innocence of his lordship would be fully made manifest. Indeed, immediately after the events at Oaklands Lord Clandon ceased to occupy a cell in the prison of Newgate—but was lodged in the best apartments of the Governor's house, where he was treated with all possible distinction. He did not however avail himself of the altered circumstances of his case to demand permission to issue from the prison-walls: but he was daily visited by Queen Indora, the young Duke of Marchmont, and Lady Christina Vivian.

The day of the trial arrived; and the court was crowded to excess. Indora and Christina were not there: they considered that it would not be seemly for them to make their appearance thus in public. But Christian was present; and as he sat upon the bench near the judge, he was an object of the utmost interest on the part of all the spectators. Clad in mourning—which he however wore rather for the sake of the hapless Lavinia than for that of the assassin of his own father—looking pale and slightly careworn with the effects of much excitement,—the young Duke maintained a demeanour in which dignity and modesty were blended; and he longed for the termination of these proceedings that he might accompany his loved relative Lord Clandon to the home prepared for his reception in Belgrave Square.

A profound silence for a few minutes reigned in the Court when Lord Clandon was ushered into the dock; and a feeling of deep sympathy prevailed on behalf of that nobleman. He, as well as Christian, was clad in mourning: for inasmuch as his brother had died penitent, Bertram did not conceive that he ought to refuse that tribute to the memory of the deceased.

The jury having been sworn and the indictment read, there was a pause to afford an opportunity for the prosecuting counsel, if any, to rise and open the case. But there was none; and the judge observed—glancing with much kindness and sympathy towards the prisoner,—"It is notorious that in this case the nobleman who stands in the dock will in a few minutes make his innocence completely manifest; and it is therefore a most unnecessary humiliation to keep him in a place which criminals only should occupy."

This hint was immediately welcomed by murmurs of approbation; and the turnkey at once requested Lord Clandon to issue from the dock and take a seat at the barristers' table. Then several noblemen and gentlemen, who had known him in his younger days, crowded round to shake him by the hand: and several friends of a more recent date likewise pressed forward for the same purpose. Amongst these latter were Sir William Stanley, his son Captain Stanley, and Sir Frederick Latham. Mr. Coleman was likewise there,—having in his possession the important document which had recently been drawn up at Oaklands, and which was now to be produced. This was the confession.

In the first place Purvis the steward, and the physician who had attended at the murderer's death-bed, were placed in the witness-box and sworn; and they declared that they had attested the document which was now exhibited to them. Mr. Coleman went through the same ceremony, and the clerk of the Court then read the confession. It was listened to with the attention and interest which such a narrative was so well calculated to excite; and when the reading was terminated, the foreman of the jury at once rose, saying, "It is with unfeigned pleasure that we formally proclaim that with which the court was already acquainted; namely, the innocence of Lord Clandon."

"Before your lordship pronounces my discharge," said Bertram, rising from the seat which he had taken at the barristers' table, "I would crave your indulgence and that of the jury while I speak a few words on my own behalf. I admit my object to be that they should go forth to the public through the ordinary channels of intelligence. I have two distinct purposes in view: in the first place, to rescue the memory of a deceased lady from even the slightest remnant of suspicion which may rest against it — and in the second place to prove how for several long years I was in utter ignorance of my uncle's tragic end, and how for even some time after that intelligence reached me, I was unable to take any steps towards the demonstration of my innocence."

Lord Clandon paused for a few moments: he was deeply affected at that allusion which he had made to the deceased Duchess Eliza. Having regained his self-possession, and amidst the breathless silence which prevailed in the court, he proceeded as follows: —

"Not for an instant do I attempt to deny that I fondly and devotedly loved Eliza Lacey, with whom I first became acquainted at Oxford. We plighted our faith to each other: we were separated—and I went abroad. During my absence it was reported that I had perished; and she was prevailed upon to accompany my uncle the Duke of Marchmont to the altar. Subsequently she learnt that I was alive: but into all these details of a sad, sad history it is not my purpose to enter. Suffice it to say that I deemed her faithless; and on arriving in England, I repaired to Oaklands that I might have an opportunity of upbraiding her for the supposed perfidy. That opportunity presented itself: but, alas! I found that she was to be pitied and not blamed. Our mental agony was immense—excruciating—ineffable. But she was a wife! Had she been the wife of a stranger, her position would have rendered her not the less sacred in my eyes: but as the wife of my own uncle——Oh! I was incapable of a deed of infamy! It was arranged that I was to depart speedily from Oaklands and set out for the Court of Florence, to which I had been appointed Envoy Plenipotentiary. The moment for bidding farewell drew nigh: my adieux were said to the Duchess Eliza; and yielding to the anguish of my feelings, I clasped her in my arms. The Duke beheld the scene—as you have already been informed by the confession ere now read,—that confession of my guilty brother! I fled to the village tavern; and some while afterwards my brother joined me, with the intelligence that the Duchess Eliza had disappeared from Oaklands. She had gone forth as a wanderer on the face of the earth,—she who was innocent! Maddened by the tidings, I sped in search of the unhappy lady. For hours I wandered; and at length I overtook her. It was then midnight;—and in a lonely spot by the side of a stream was she seated, weeping bitterly. This spot was miles away from Oaklands. She reproached me not as the author of the frightful calamities which had fallen upon her head; and though she gave way to the most passionate lamentations, she mentioned not my name with upbraiding. She vowed that she would retire into some complete seclusion where she would linger out the rest of her unhappy days; and this seclusion she was determined should be far remote from the scenes where she had suffered so much misery. My conduct was full of respect and sympathy and grief; and I did not even so much as take her hand: I felt that any demonstration of tenderness on my part would be an insult in such circumstances. I persuaded her to proceed to an adjacent village where she might repose herself for a few hours. She accompanied me: we walked side by side—she did not even take my arm, though she was sinking with fatigue—and I dared not offer it. As we entered the village, in the middle of that momentous night, a return post-chaise was passing through. The unhappy Duchess abruptly proclaimed her intention of taking it. She entered the vehicle: I sat upon the box;—I was resolved that whatsoever might subsequently transpire, there should be nothing in my conduct to justify or to enhance the suspicions already pressing so fatally against her. On reaching the town to which the chaise belonged, the Duchess bade me ensure her the means of rapid conveyance to one of the remotest counties of England, it mattered not which. An equipage with four horses was accordingly obtained; and I resolved to see the unfortunate lady to some place of safety before I bade her farewell for ever: for I was afraid lest in her despair she should commit suicide! Indeed," added Lord Clandon, with a voice full of emotion, "I believe she meditated self-destruction at the moment when I found her weeping so bitterly by the side of that stream."

He again paused for a few minutes; and then continued his narrative in the ensuing manner:—

"The Duchess travelled inside the chaise: I continued to ride outside, acting as her guardian and her friend. We travelled on and on for many long, long hours without ceasing; and frequently did I ask the Duchess whether she would now stop and find a home in some neighbouring seclusion? But when she asked where we were, and the answer was first 'In Warwickshire'—then 'In Derbyshire'—then 'In Yorkshire'—she still replied with passionate vehemence that she would go further still. And thus, without stopping except for a few minutes at a time, we reached Cumberland. Then the Duchess said that she would halt there; and indeed, thoroughly exhausted mentally and physically as she was, it would have been impossible for her to proceed farther. At a village near the Scottish Border did we thus stop at last; and the Duchess besought that I would continue to conceal her name and rank, as both had been concealed throughout that long, long journey. With the least possible delay the unhappy Duchess procured for herself a lodging in a cottage situated about a mile from the village, and the mistress of which was a widow between thirty and forty years of age. I then bade adieu to the Duchess. There was one clasp of the hand—there was one kiss imprinted upon her brow—and I rushed away, not daring to remain another minute!"

Again did Lord Clandon pause; and so full of pathos had been his voice as he told this affecting tale, that there was scarcely an unmoistened eye in the Court.

"Yes, I fled precipitately," he at length resumed, "anguish and remorse in my heart—for I felt that I had been the cause of this wrecked happiness and ruined reputation which had overtaken one so innocent, so young, so beautiful! I sped to the nearest seaport on the eastern coast: I embarked on board the first ship which I found ready to bear me away from a country that I resolved never to revisit. I pictured to myself a terrific exposure at Oaklands—the direst accusations fulminating against my character—my reputation gone—my prospects blighted—and the name of Bertram Vivian handed over to universal execration as that of the seducer of his own uncle's wife! It was a Dutch ship in which I embarked; and I arrived at Rotterdam. At the very moment of entering the port, a large ship was clearing out for the Indian Seas. Unhesitatingly I took my passage on board of her; and favoured by prosperous winds, the voyage was made in an exceedingly short space of time to Java. Thence I repaired to Calcutta, with the determination of offering my services to the Anglo-Indian Government; for the funds which I had in my possession when leaving England, were now nearly exhausted. I had assumed the name of Clement Redcliffe; and I should add that my arrival at Calcutta had out-stripped all British intelligence of events passing at the time I left my own native country: so that I still continued in the completest ignorance of the horrible tragedy which had occurred at Oaklands. I must here observe that it happened, when I was engaged in a diplomatic capacity at Washington—prior to that fatal visit of mine to England which had led me to Oaklands—I had obtained certain intelligence in respect to the policy of the United States' Government towards Japan and China. I learnt on my arrival at Calcutta that there were flying rumours of this contemplated policy: but no one seemed to understand the precise bearings thereof. I waited upon the Governor-General, and gave him such explanations that not only astonished him, but likewise proved to be of the highest importance; so that he was enabled to send off efficient instructions to the naval commanders in the Chinese seas, as well as to the British political agents in various quarters. My introduction to the Governor-General was thus most favourable to my views; and when I informed him that I had been attached to the British Embassy at Washington he asked me no more questions: it never struck him that I might have borne another name; and he at once offered me employment in the civil service of India. This I accepted; and in a very few days set off on a special mission to the Nizam. At that Sovereign's Court I remained for upwards of a year, deeply engaged in diplomatic negotiations. No English newspaper ever reached me; and I thus continued in total ignorance of the events which so intimately regarded my character and good name in my native land. Having succeeded in all the objects for which I had been accredited to the Nizam's Court, I was directed by a special courier bearing despatches from the Governor-General to repair on a similar mission to the King of Inderabad. From various causes the small retinue with which I travelled, dwindled away; and I arrived alone at the chief city of Inderabad. There I found myself a prisoner. Years elapsed; no inquiry was made after me—for the King of Inderabad, in order to accomplish his own aims, caused the rumour to be spread that I was no more. At length, in the year 1845, an English traveller was assassinated, by miscreants of the Thuggee caste, in a forest at no great distance from the city of Inderabad. Amongst his effects an English newspaper was discovered. Though sixteen years had then elapsed since the events at Oaklands, there was nevertheless a paragraph in that journal which alluded thereto. It was one of those paragraphs which frequently refer to any memorable occurrences connected with eminent families: and *then*, for the first time, I learnt that my uncle had been murdered—that I was branded as his assassin—that neither myself nor the Duchess Eliza had ever since been heard of—and it was supposed that we as a guilty pair had fled together to some remote part of the world, to elude the consequences of our crimes. I will not pause to depict the feelings with which I perused this statement: but I implored my freedom—and it was still refused. A short while afterwards I succeeded in effecting my escape,—bringing with me the immense wealth which the King of Inderabad had lavished in acknowledgment of various important services that I had rendered him. I returned to England; and my first care was to search the files of newspapers to gather a complete knowledge of all that had taken place after my precipitate flight from Oaklands. My hideous suspicions were confirmed: I comprehended but too well that my wretched brother must have been the murderer of his uncle, and that to save himself he had so combined all circumstances as to fix the guilt upon me. I need now say no more. In a short time, and in another place, I shall be called upon to continue a narrative which is so replete with sad and memorable details. But I have said sufficient to prove the complete innocence of the Duchess Eliza, and to show likewise how it was that so many long, long years elapsed ere I returned to this country to make inquiries into the past and to adopt the requisite measures for vindicating my own maligned reputation."

Lord Clandon ceased; and there were strong demonstrations of interest and sympathy through the court. The Judge addressed him in a complimentary manner—winding up a most appropriate speech with the intimation that he was now at freedom. Lord Clandon bowed, and left the court in company with his friends.

CHAPTER CXLIX.

THE COMMITTEE OF PRIVILEGES.

ALTHOUGH the right and title of the young Duke of Marchmont appeared to have been universally admitted—although he entered at once upon possession of the mansions, revenues, and vast domains—and although not the slightest opposition was from any quarter displayed, and no pettifogging attorney endeavoured to rake up a case with the view of being bought off so as not to throw trouble in the way—yet was it absolutely necessary, for the sake alike of form and law, that our young hero should prove his claims before a Committee of Privileges of the House of Lords. For this purpose the expiration of two or three months had to be awaited for the assembling of Parliament. Queen Indora therefore remained in England—because Lord Clandon was himself forced to tarry for that committee, and it was arranged that her Majesty and his lordship were to return to India together.

We will not now pause to describe how passed the time during this interval: but we will at once proceed to state that on the assembling of Parliament the Lords appointed a committee to conduct the investigation. Mr. Coleman, assisted by able Doctors of Civil Law, managed the entire case; and it was naturally his study to present the evidence in its most consecutive form to the noble committee.

The young Duke of Marchmont himself was the first witness in his own case. He stated that himself and his sister Christina had been brought up from their earliest infancy by a gentleman of the name of Ashton, who resided at a village in Westmoreland, at a distance of about twenty-five miles from Woodbridge. Christian and Christina had always been led to suppose that Mr. Ashton was their uncle, and that their own parents had died when they were babes. Nothing had ever occurred until the grand disclosure at Oaklands, to excite in their minds a suspicion that this story of their birth was otherwise than completely true. They were born at the end of May, 1830; and their birthday had always been regularly kept by Mr. Ashton. Some time before he died, he had given them certain relics which he represented as having belonged to their deceased mother; and these Christian produced. There was a long tress of raven hair: next there was a beautiful gold watch of delicate fashion and exquisite workmanship, with the cipher E graven upon the case: then there were two rings, one of which was a wedding-ring—the other of peculiar workmanship, with the cipher B graven upon a stone. Christian proceeded to relate that about three years previously Mr. Ashton had died suddenly, being stricken with an apoplectic fit; and for some little while after his death the twins continued to reside at the same house in the village. Then a certain Mr. Joseph Preston—of whom they had some little previous acquaintance, as he was a friend of Mr. Ashton's—signified to them that they must repair to London, so that they might be in the same city where he dwelt and that he might be enabled to attend to their welfare. He made them a liberal allowance, considering that their wants were small and that their habits were the very reverse of being extravagant: but he never gave them any information relative to their private affairs nor the pecuniary circumstances in which they had been left; nor did he explain the views which, if any, he entertained with regard to their future position. At the expiration of a few months Mr. Preston suddenly disappeared; and the twins were reduced to considerable temporary difficulties.

In answer to certain leading questions which were purposely put in order to elicit all the particulars that might bear upon his case,—Christian stated that he had recently been shown some papers represented to be in the handwriting of the late Mr. Ashton, and which regarded the circumstances of the birth of himself and sister; and he could vouch that these papers were positively in the handwriting of the said deceased Mr. Ashton.

Depositions of all that had occurred at Oaklands in the month of September and beginning of October 1829, were now put in and read before the Lords forming the Committee of Privileges.

The next witness who was called, was a female answering to the name of Jane Barclay. This was none other than she whom the reader has previously known as Crazy Jane: but she deserved the epithet no longer. Under a judicious system of treatment in the house of an eminent psychological physician, she had completely regained her intellect; and the poor mad wanderer of many years had, through the liberality and kindness of Lord Clandon, become restored to the possession of all her reasoning faculties. She was now decently, indeed handsomely apparelled; and though care, and suffering, and fatigues during that errant life which she had led, had destroyed the beauty with which in her youth she was endowed,—yet was her aspect marvellously improved, and no one who had known her as Crazy Jane would have recognised her now as Miss Barclay. She deposed to the fact that only a few days before the terrible scenes took place at Oaklands, in the year 1829, the Duchess Eliza had intimated to her that she fancied she was in a way to become a mother—but that she should not immediately inform the Duke thereof, as she could not be altogether certain in so early a stage of pregnancy. In answer to questions that were put to her, Jane Barclay was positively enabled to state that if the Duchess were correct in her idea, and if she had really lived to become a mother, the time of her confinement must have been about the very date mentioned by our young hero as that of the birthday of himself and his twin sister. Jane Barclay was enabled to swear that the watch marked with the letter E had belonged to the Duchess Eliza: but she did not remember ever to have seen the ring graven with the letter B in the possession of her Grace. As for the wedding-ring, she could not of course pretend to assert that it was her ladyship's, as there is so much similitude between the generality of such rings.

The next witness who appeared before the Committee, was a respectable-looking elderly woman, who deposed that her name was Mrs. Hutton, and that she had for many years resided in Cumberland near the Scottish border. She perfectly well recollected that in the Autumn of 1829, a gentleman and a lady arrived at her house, and that the lady made an arrangement for her unoccupied apartments. The lady seemed plunged into the deepest distress: the gentleman had a strange wild look—and both were young. The gentleman took his departure almost immediately after the engagement for the rooms was made. As the new lodger came totally unprovided with any effects beyond those which she had on her—and as the circumstances of their arrival, as well as their looks excited her suspicion that there was something wrong—Mrs. Hutton had listened at the door of the parlour where they bade each other farewell. She distinctly heard the young gentleman say, "*Adieu, Eliza, for ever!*"—but she could not catch the reply which the lady made. The gentleman went away. For some hours after he was gone, the lady sat statue-like as if plunged into the deepest despair. After a while she inquired for a needle and thread: she took a small piece of velvet—and therewith she made a little bag. Into this she put her watch and her wedding-ring, as well as another ring, which she took from her bosom: she cut off a long lock of her hair—which was of raven darkness; and this likewise she put into the little bag—which she then sewed up. To the bag she attached a black ribbon, which she put round her neck, securing the bag in her bosom. All this she did in the presence of Mrs. Hutton—not amidst weeping, but in the silence of cold blank despair. When her task was finished, she raised her countenance, looked at Mrs. Hutton, and said, "*This shall be for my babe, if I live to give birth to it. The contents of that bag may some day serve as a clue, if ever such be needed, when I shall be dead and gone!*"—Mrs. Htton gently asked, "*A clue to what?*"—whereat the lady suddenly started up and fixed upon her a look so full of wild suspicion that she was frightened lest the unfortunate being was going mad. In the middle of the ensuing night the stranger lady—for she had given no name—abruptly quitted the house, leaving the front door wide open; so that Mrs. Hutton now felt convinced that grief had really turned her brain, and she resolved to speak to the local authorities in the morning. But the lady never came back. Some time afterwards she read in an old newspaper that happened to fall into her hands, a narrative of the tragic events which had occurred at Oaklands; and she was more than half inclined to fancy that the strangers whom she had seen at her house were none other than Bertram Vivian and the Duchess Eliza: but afraid of getting into some trouble if it were known that she had held any communication with persons who were accused of such crimes, she held her peace concerning them. When now asked to describe to the Committee of Privileges the lady who had thus remained a few hours beneath her roof so many years ago, she drew a portraiture which precisely corresponded with that of the unfortunate Duchess.

The next witness was the proprietor of a lunatic asylum in Northumberland. This gentleman stated that in the fall of the year 1829—and, so far as he could recollect, about a fortnight or three weeks after the dates mentioned by Mrs. Hutton—he one morning found a lady wandering in a wild state in the fields near his establishment. He conducted her to his house; and he found that she was completely deprived of her intellect. She was no sooner located there than she sank into a deep silent brooding dejection. He made inquiries throughout the neighbourhood and advertised in several local newspapers—but could obtain not the slightest clue relative to who she was. As she was evidently a person of gentility, or at least had known better days, he and his wife took compassion on her: and when they found that she was in a way to become a mother they looked upon her as the victim of seduction who had most probably been discarded by her friends; and they therefore deemed it unnecessary—or rather, we should say, useless—to institute any additional research on her behalf. She never spoke a word—but was docile as a lamb, save and except if any one endeavoured to examine the little bag which she kept in her bosom; and then she grew frantic. They therefore for humanity's sake desisted from their endeavours to see what it contained; and still from motives of charity they kept her at their asylum. At the expiration of some weeks, however, she grew violent, and gave indications of approaching delirium. Her head was accordingly shaved: but during the night that followed, she escaped from the asylum, and was heard of by the witness no more.

The next witness produced before their lordships was Jonathan Carnabie. He deposed that he was sexton and parish-clerk at the village of Woodbridge, in Westmoreland. He recollected that in the beginning of the year 1830, he very early one morning beheld a female lying over a grave in the churchyard. He hastened to raise her: he thought that she was dead—for she was pale, cold, and rigid as a corpse. She however proved to be merely in a deep swoon. He knew that she was a lady by her appearance, though her dress was much travel-soiled—holes were worn through her shoes and stockings—her feet were cut and bleeding. Jonathan bore her off to the parsonage, which was close by the church: the clergyman and his family were absent at the time on a visit to some friends in Lancashire; and there was no one but a female-servant in the parsonage. This woman however did her best to recover the poor lady from her insensibility; and in time she succeeded. A medical man was sent for; and he at once pronounced that she was utterly bereft of her senses—that her reason was gone—that her mind was a perfect void. Indeed, her head had evidently been but very recently shaved; and it was therefore concluded she had escaped from some lunatic asylum. She had a little velvet bag attached to a ribbon round her neck; and the only sign of vital consciousness which she displayed, was when any one attempted to touch this bag. The surgeon said it was useless to excite the poor lady to frenzy by taking the little bag from her in order to open it; for that it doubtless merely contained some trinkets which had been given to amuse her at the asylum whence she had escaped—and that therefore these trinkets themselves could not be supposed to afford any clue as to who she was or whence she had come. The intelligence of the discovery of the poor lady in the churchyard speedily spread through the village, and reached the ears of a worthy gentleman of the name of Ashton, who was then residing at Woodbridge. He felt interested in the case; and he gave the poor lady a home. He watched the newspapers of Westmoreland and the surrounding counties, in order to see if any advertisement appeared describing who the lady might be: but no notification of the kind was given. She therefore became domiciled at Mr. Ashton's; and it was in the month of May, 1830, that she became the mother of twins. She never recovered her senses sufficiently to give the slightest account of herself: but she displayed the most affectionate tenderness towards her poor babes. Mr. Ashton, who was the most benevolent of men, treated her with a kindness which could not have been greater were he her father; and he bestowed his own name on the poor children. As they were twins, he resolved to give them Christian names which should have a kindred significancy, or rather similitude; and hence those names of Christian and Christina. In the month of October the poor lady died; and she was buried in the churchyard at Woodbridge,—Mr. Ashton causing the stone, with the simple inscription of "*October*, 1830," to be erected at the head of her grave. Very shortly afterwards he removed to some place about five-and-twenty miles distant; and Jonathan Carnabie heard no more of him nor of the children. In answer to leading questions that were put, the old sexton drew a portraiture of the lady, which corresponded with that of the Duchess Eliza; and he produced the baptismal certificate of the twins, their birthday being the one which, according to Christian's previous statement, they had always been wont to keep during the lifetime of Mr. Ashton.

Lord Clandon was the next witness who attended to give his evidence before the Committee of Privileges. He stated that immediately upon his return to England from India, he set off into Cumberland, and called at the house of Mrs. Hutton, where he had bidden farewell to the Duchess Eliza so many years back. Mrs. Hutton did not know him at first: but when he began instituting inquiries, she recognised him; and she grew frightened—for she had all along believed that he was really Bertram Vivian to whom the foul deed of murder was imputed. He therefore admitted to her that he was that unfortunate individual: but he said enough to convince her that he was innocent of the crime charged against him. She then told him how the lady whom he had left at her house, had enclosed certain articles of jewellery in a little velvet bag, and how she had fled, no doubt in a state of mental aberration. Lord Clandon took his departure from that house, and prosecuted his inquiries elsewhere—but all to no effect. Finding that his efforts were useless thus far—and being bent upon adopting the earliest possible measures to make his innocence manifest before the world—he employed a trustworthy individual (who however knew not his objects and motives) to pursue those inquiries which he was resolved never to abandon until he succeeded in obtaining some trace of the long-lost Duchess, or some clue to her fate. It will be remembered that when a short time afterwards he was staying with his friend Sir William Ashton in the neighbourhood of Liverpool, on the occasion of Lettice Rodney's trial, he fell in with Crazy Jane, whom he discovered to be Jane Barclay, the principal lady's-maid of the Duchess Eliza in years gone by: he provided a comfortable home for that unfortunate creature: but in the unsettled state of her intellect, she abandoned it. At about the same time that the intelligence of her disappearance reached Lord Clandon in London, he received a communication from the trusty agent whom he had left pursuing inquiries in the northern counties. This communication was to the effect that the agent had succeeded in discovering that after the flight of the Duchess Eliza from Mrs. Hutton's abode on the border of Cumberland, the unhappy lady had been for some while an inmate of a lunatic asylum in Northumberland. Thither Lord Clandon at once proceeded from London: and he heard all that the proprietor of that asylum could tell him upon the painful subject. Having some leisure upon his hands, he renewed his own personal inquiries throughout those northern counties; and at the same time he forgot not poor Crazy Jane. Of this latter he received some intelligence; and the result thereof was the visit which he paid to Woodbridge. There—according to his wont, in prosecuting his inquiries in any new place relative to the long-lost Duchess Eliza—his first care was to examine the tombstones in the churchyard, in order to ascertain whether amidst those memorials of the dead he should chance to find one that would set at rest the mystery which enveloped the fate of the Duchess—though he then knew not whether she were still an inhabitant of this world or had gone to the next. While inspecting those grave-stones at Woodbridge, he beheld the one with the singularly laconic inscription: he fell in with Crazy Jane; and circumstances led him into communication with Jonathan Carnabie. From the old sexton's lips he learnt sufficient to clear up all the mystery which had hitherto enveloped the fate of the unfortunate Duchess. To his unspeakable wonderment he at the same time learnt that the twins Christian and Christina Ashton, whom chance had previously thrown in his way in London, were the offspring of the deceased Duchess—and they ignorant of the secret of their birth! On his return to London, he sent for Christian from Ramsgate, and gave him a home: he examined the maternal relics which the twins had preserved: he recognised the Duchess Eliza's watch: and the ring with the initial B upon it, was the same which he had given to her in the days of their love at Oxford. That Christian and Christina were the lawful offspring of the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont, there could be no doubt: but still Lord Clandon felt that the evidence which he had as yet obtained would be scarcely sufficient to prove their claims; and moreover he himself could not appear publicly in any judicial investigation until his own innocence was made manifest. In these circumstances he thought it more prudent to retain the secret of their birth from the knowledge of the twins: so that they might not be buoyed up with hopes which perhaps never would be fulfilled. But in a short time providence threw additional testimony into his hands. On the occasion of one of the visits which he made into the neighbourhood of Oaklands for purposes connected with the plans which were in progress for the development of his innocence, he fell in with a woman whom he knew not at the time, but whom a handbill subsequently proved to be the murderess Barbara Smedley. On her person a sealed packet was found; and this packet contained certain papers intimately connected with the interests of the twins.

The next witness who appeared for examination before the Committee of Privileges, was John Smedley. It will be remembered that he had surrendered himself up to justice in consequence of a handbill proclaiming that the mercy of the Crown would be to a certain degree extended to any one of the gang of miscreants connected with the house in Lambeth (the Burker himself excepted) who would give such information as should place the others in the hands of the police: or that the same benefit would be extended to that one of the same gang who would surrender up the Burker alone to the authorities. John Smedley had been the means of betraying the Burker, when disguised as a Jew, into the hands of the police; and it assuredly was not his fault that the miscreant Barney had subsequently escaped. Smedley therefore—on pleading guilty at the Old Bailey to the charge of murder, and confessing that he had helped to assassinate one Joseph Preston—had received the benefit of the royal mercy, according to the promise of the handbill; and his life being spared, he was sentenced to transportation for the remainder of his days. But inasmuch as his evidence was needed before the Committee of Privileges in respect to the Marchmont Peerage, he was retained a prisoner in Newgate instead of being immediately sent out of the country. He now therefore appeared, in the custody of turnkeys, in the presence of that Committee.

The testimony of John Smedley was to the following effect. Some time back he had at his house in Lambeth a lodger who passed by the name of Smith. This lodger desired that a letter might be taken to the address which appeared upon the envelope. It was directed to Mr. Ashton, at Mrs. Macaulay's, Mortimer Street, Cavendish Square. Smedley, his wife, and mother opened the letter instead of taking it to its address. They found by its contents that their lodger's real name was Joseph Preston—that he had lived on Cambridge Terrace—that he had sorely wronged Christian and Chris-

tina Ashton—and that under a plank in one of the rooms which he specified at his house in Cambridge Terrace, they would find documents which might be of more or less importance to themselves. In consequence of perusing this letter, Smedley and his wife went to the house in Cambridge Terrace, and possessed themselves of the documents in the hope that their deliverance into the hands of Mr. and Miss Ashton might be productive of a reward. But on inquiring at Mrs. Macaulay's house, Barbara Smedley found that the twins had left—that they had fallen into poverty—and that there was no chance of obtaining a recompense at their hands. The Smedleys however kept the papers with the idea that they would some day prove lucrative; and these were the documents, together with Joseph Preston's letter, which Lord Clandon had found in the sealed packet upon the person of Barbara Smedley.

The documents were now produced before the Committee; and Christian, be it recollected, had already proclaimed his conviction that those which bore the signature of the deceased Mr. Ashton were really in that gentleman's handwriting. One document consisted of a will which Mr. Ashton had left in favour of the twins, bequeathing them the sum of six thousand pounds, with Joseph Preston as the guardian and executor. Another document was an affectionate letter to the twins, penned by Mr. Ashton in case he should die before he considered that they had reached an age when they ought to be made acquainted with all the secrets and mysteries attending their birth. A third document, also written by the deceased Mr. Ashton, contained a full narrative of those secrets and mysteries, in precise accordance with the evidence given by Jonathan Carnabie. The remaining document was Joseph Preston's letter to the twins, which the Smedleys had intercepted. This letter informed them that, smitten with remorse for his conduct towards those who had been entrusted to his guardianship, he implored their forgiveness—that he was already steeped in pecuniary difficulties when he became their guardian at Mr. Ashton's death—that he had made away with the six thousand pounds bequeathed them by that gentleman—that the only atonement, slight though it were, which he could now offer, was to place them in possession of certain documents which he had found in Mr. Ashton's writing-desk, and which he had not intended to give up to them until they attained their majority—that these documents would be discovered in a peculiar recess at his house in Cambridge Terrace, for that in the precipitation of his flight from that residence he had forgotten to take them with him.

The reading of these documents terminated the evidence on behalf of our young hero as a claimant for the Marchmont Peerage. The Lords forming the Committee of Privileges, inquired if there were any opposition?—and being answered in the negative, they deliberated together for a few minutes. The result of their conference was an intimation to the counsel appearing on Christian's behalf, that it was entirely unnecessary for those learned gentlemen to address their lordships upon the evidence, as the mind of the Committee was already made up. A decision was then solemnly pronounced in Christian's favour: he was recognised as the just claimant and the rightful possessor of the Marchmont Peerage; and he thereupon received the congratulations of all who were so deeply interested in our young hero's welfare.

CHAPTER CL.

MORE EXPLANATIONS.

ONE of the firsts acts of Christian and Christina after the occurrence of the memorable events at Oaklands, was to proceed into Westmoreland, and visit the spot where reposed the remains of their mother. They were naturally anxious that these remains should be transferred to the family-vault of the Marchmonts, and not be suffered to lie in the obscurity of a remote church-yard: but it was suggested by Lord Clandon that this proceeding should be postponed until after the Committee of Privileges had decided upon Christian's claims, and when the complete narrative of the past would go forth to the world, fully proving the innocence of the deceased Duchess Eliza. Now, therefore, that the decision of that committee had been rendered, and that the tragic history was known in all its sad and romantic details, the wish of the twins was about to be fulfilled in all its filial piety.

A second visit was paid by the young Duke of Marchmont and Lady Christina Vivian to the little village of Woodbridge; and before the humble grave was disturbed, they went alone together to weep for the last time over that spot which had for so many years been the resting-place of their unfortunate parent. Clad in deep mourning, that amiable youth and his charming sister bent over the grave, moistening with their tears the turf which was soon to be disturbed: they knelt there, and they prayed;—long did they contemplate the stone with the laconic inscription; and embracing each other fondly, they both alike felt that if any reason were wanting to cement the affection which had hitherto subsisted between them, it was now supplied by the respect due to the memory of their perished mother. And when for some time they had been left alone at the grave, their loved and revered relative Lord Clandon joined them there;—and he too knelt and prayed—he too moistened that turf with his tears—and he too in sadness contemplated the stone-memorial which the kindness of a stranger had long years back placed at the head of that grave. It was a touching scene—and one the full pathos of which must be left to the imagination; for it cannot be described in words.

The ceremony which had brought the twins and Lord Clandon to Woodbridge, then commenced—they themselves remaining the while at the Parsonage House. The grave was opened: the coffin was exhumed and placed in a hearse that was in readiness for its reception. A mourning-coach conveyed the young Duke, his sister, and Lord Clandon to the nearest railway-station; and they proceeded with the remains of the deceased Duchess to Oaklands. There the coffin was consigned to the family-vault in the neighbouring church; and the Duchess Eliza slept by the side of her husband.

Lord Clandon had now no longer any motive for remaining in England: but before he took his departure, his nuptials with Queen Indora were solemnised. The ceremony was performed with comparative privacy, at the villa which her Majesty had occupied during her residence in London: Lady Christina Vivian, Miss Isabella Vincent, and two other young ladies belonging to one of the noblest families of the aristocracy, acted as bridesmaids. Immediately after the marriage the bridegroom and bride repaired to pass a week at Oaklands; and at the expiration of that time the moment arrived for them to take leave of those in whom they were so deeply interested. We have before said that there is no happiness in this world without its alloy; and the happiness of the newly married pair was shadowed by the necessity of separating from Christian and Christina. Indeed, when the moment of parting came, it seemed as if it were felt on both sides that they were never to see each other again; and profound was the affliction of our young heroine on receiving the farewell embrace of that royal lady towards whom she owed so large a debt of gratitude, and whom she loved so well. Lord Clandon bestowed some excellent advice upon Christian before taking leave of him—although his lordship had the fullest confidence in the rectitude of his ducal relative. The Queen and Lord Clandon took their departure, attended by a small suite, amongst which was the faithful Mark. They left the British shores to return to the Kingdom of Inderabad, where Indora was to take her seat on the throne that awaited her, and to place by her side on that regal elevation the husband whom she would make a King, and whose presence she knew would be so welcome to the millions of her subjects already enjoying the benefits of his enlightened policy.

We may here avail ourselves of an opportunity to give a few little explanations which will complete the elucidation of all the mysteries of the past. The reader has already perceived how Indora had learnt in her own native city the real name of him who passed by the fictitious one of Clement Redcliffe—and how from the passionate language which had burst from his lips at the time, she gleaned enough to prove that he had just made the discovery of how he laboured under a frightful imputation in his own native land. After he had escaped from Inderabad she followed him to England; and she obtained an interview with him, as recorded in one of the earliest chapters in this narrative. She comprehended that he was bent upon adopting measures to prove his innocence; for she knew him too well to believe for a single instant that he could ever have been guilty of a crime. Then it was that the romantic idea of secretly succouring him in his endeavour to demonstrate that innocence, flashed to the mind of the fond and devoted Indora. But having only a dim idea of the circumstances attending that crime of which he was accused, Indora ordered Mark to procure the files of an English newspaper, that she might obtain a perfect knowledge of all that it concerned her to know. In that newspaper she read the particulars of the tragedy at Oaklands in the year 1829; and she had no difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that as Bertram Vivian himself was assuredly innocent, his brother Hugh must be the guilty person. To visit Oaklands—to behold the spot which had proved the scene of the tragedy—to glean whatsoever she might be possibly enabled to pick up—and to avail herself of any circumstances that might transpire towards the furtherance of her aims,—these were the ideas that naturally began to occupy the attention of Indora. Thus, when Madame Angelique called at Shrubbery Villa, and in the course of conversation proposed a visit to Oaklands, Indora readily accepted the offer; for though she comprehended the treacherous reason for which it was made, she had no fear of being unable to combat against the designs of the Duke of Marchmont. Besides, she wished to meet that man face to face, that she might form her own idea of his disposition, and judge to what an extent it might subsequently be worked upon through the medium of his conscience.

Now, it happened that Bertram Vivian himself, in adopting measures for the demonstration of his innocence, paid occasional stealthy visits to the neighbourhood of Oaklands,—rather perhaps to trust to the chapter of accidents, than with any precise and settled plan of action in view at the time. On the occasion of one of those visits—and being concealed amongst the trees—he to his astonishment beheld Indora walking in the grounds with the old steward. He fancied that she must have been beguiled thither by some treachery—especially as he knew that Madame Angelique had conceived designs against herself and Sagoonah—those designs of which he had given her a hint, and against which he had warned her in a brief note written from Mortimer Street. Therefore, on finding Indora at Oaklands, Bertram Vivian was resolved to watch over her safety; and he beheld her take her departure. His brother had in the meantime come to Oaklands; and Bertram could not resist the temptation of endeavouring to work upon his fears as one of the first steps towards the accomplishment of his aims. He had no difficulty in effecting a stealthy entrance into the mansion; and he happened to conceal himself in that very room to which his brother and Purvis penetrated that they might ascertain whether Indora had replaced the dagger in the drawer whence she had taken it. Bertram was fearful of being discovered; for he knew that his brother was villain enough to hand him over to the grasp of the law—and he at that time was totally unprepared with any proof of his innocence! He therefore dashed the candle from his brother's hand; and he effected his escape from the spot amidst the utter darkness in which he thus suddenly involved the room. But he had previously overheard the conversation which took place between his brother and Purvis in respect to the dagger; and the motive of Indora's visit to Oaklands began to be apparent to his mind. He saw that she had not been inveigled thither by treachery; and he conjectured that it was on account of his own affairs that she had come. He further surmised that she must have had some particular conversation with Purvis; and he was determined to ascertain. He therefore introduced himself stealthily in the night-time to the old steward's room: he revealed his name—and he subsequently found a faithful assistant in Purvis. The conduct of Indora made a deep impression upon Bertram's mind: it was another proof of her devoted love for him: he saw that she was labouring in his behalf; and so many evidences of her affection went far to mitigate the impression that he had mainly owed his lengthened captivity in Inderabad to the influence which she possessed with her father. After his visit to Woodbridge and his discovery that the Duchess Eliza had long been dead, he waited upon Indora at her villa; and he then informed her that the circumstances which had previously prevented him from giving her aught beyond a vague hope, had ceased to exist. The reader now comprehends the real significancy of some of those incidents which at the time of their occurrence were involved in a certain degree of mystery.

We need hardly add that liberal rewards were bestowed—not only by Lord Clandon, but also by the young Duke of Marchmont—upon all those to whom they had any reason to experience gratitude. The proprietor of the lunatic asylum in Northumberland, who had so charitably given a home to the unfortunate Duchess Eliza, had every ground to be satisfied with the liberality of Christian and Lord Clandon: Jonathan Carnabie went back to Woodbridge with more than sufficient to enable him to live without work, if he thought fit, for the remainder of his days; and Purvis, the faithful old steward, was likewise a special object of the bounty of those whom he had served. Over the grave of the deceased Mr. Ashton a monument was erected, bearing a beautifully composed tribute of the gratitude of the twins for the true paternal kindness which they had received from one to whom they were in no way related.

New that Queen Indora had left England, Christina took up her abode altogether with her brother at Marchmont House; and there they were visited by all the *élite* of the aristocracy—as well as by several friends whom Christian had acquired previous to the occurrence of those events which had proclaimed the secret of his birth. Thus, for instance, Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley, Sir Frederick and Lady Latham, and Captain Stanley were frequent visitors at Marchmont House: nor must we omit to observe that Sir William Stanley himself, when passing any time in the metropolis, was a welcome guest in Belgrave Square. Lord Octavian Meredith and Zoe still remained abroad: but frequently did Christina correspond with her friend, Armytage's daughter, who indeed had proved one of the very first to send written congratulations to both herself and her brother on their elevation to a brilliant position. The nuptials of Christian with Isabella Vincent were to take place when six months should have elapsed from the date of the events at Oaklands; and in the meantime the young lovers frequently saw each other.

One day a cab drove up to the door of Marchmont House: but the occupant of it would not immediately get out. She—for this occupant was of the feminine gender—was attired in her Sunday apparel: she appeared in all the glory of a new silk gown, a very fashionable bonnet, her gold watch and chain, and a pair of lemon-coloured kid gloves. She delivered a message to one of the domestics,—which the man forthwith took up to the young Duke and Lady Christina Vivian. It was to the effect that Mrs. Macaulay requested permission to pay her most dutiful respects to his Grace and to Lady Christina. The twins at once desired that she should be shown up; and the domestic accordingly proceeded to hand Mrs. Macaulay out of the cab with every demonstration of respect.

As she followed the footman through the marble hall and up the superb staircase, she could not help giving half audible utterance to the thoughts which were passing in her mind.

"Well," said the worthy woman, "this is indeed a palace!—and only think that I should have what's called the *entrée* of it, and be treated by this powdered and lace-bedizened gentleman"—thus alluding to the lacquey—"just for all the world as if I myself was a real lady! Ah, what a splendid palace!—and what a lodging-house it would make! Why, there must be at least a dozen sets of apartments on the first floors alone! They'd let each at four guineas a week:—four times twelve are forty-eight—that's forty-eight guineas a week!—and one might add another twenty guineas for the letting of the upper rooms! Only conceive such a lodging-house! it would be a fortune in a single year! And the quantities of cold victuals that would be left and never asked for! Why, if every lodger only left the leg of a fowl, and a single glass of wine in his decanter, it would keep a regiment! And then too, people living in such a house would never think of locking their tea-caddies, and marking the cheese and the bread to see that the servants didn't touch them! Oh, what a lodging-house!"

Mrs. Macaulay was lost in mingled awe and wonderment at the vast field which she had thus opened for her own contemplation; and the probability is that she would have gone on wondering as long as there were any more stairs to ascend, if the domestic had been conducting her to the top of the house. But as he halted on the first landing, and threw open a door to announce in a very loud voice "Mrs. Macaulay,"—the worthy woman suddenly regained her self-possession, and gathered herself together as it were for her appearance before the twins.

Although she had mustered the courage to pay this visit, she felt by no means certain with regard to the nature of the reception she should experience. She knew that she might reckon upon being received with civility: but judging the world according to her own somewhat circumscribed notions, she fancied that the young Duke would prove coldly dignified and Lady Christina politely distant. Great was her surprise, therefore—and infinite her joy—when the young Duke and his sister, hastening forward, caught each a hand, and gave her the kindest welcome. They had not seen her since their change of circumstances: for immediately after the events at Oaklands Christian had taken up his abode at Marchmont House—and Lord Clandon, after his release from Newgate, had repaired to the same destination; so that there had been no occasion for our young hero to call at the lodging-house in Mortimer Street. When she found that she thus experienced so friendly a reception, Mrs. Macaulay could not keep back her tears; and she whimpered out her thanks, as well as her congratulations on the change of circumstances which had overtaken the twins.

"Dear me!" she said, sinking down upon a sofa, "to think that I should live to see you, Master Christian, a Duke—and you, Miss Christina, a lady! But I always thought there was something distinguished about you both; and I said so to Mrs. Wanklin, and to Mrs. Chowley, which keeps the baby-linen warehouse in the Tottenham Court Road. Well, dear me! what strange things do happen in this life! You remember Captain Bluff, my lord? Well, he got promoted from a Gravesend steamer to a Margate one; and then he was so high and mighty that he refused to marry Miss Chowley; and so she went into hysterics, while her mother went off to her lawyer. And then there was an action for breach of promise; and I was summoned as a witness to appear before the bigwigs at Westminster Hall. I'm sure I never should have passed through the ordeal if it hadn't been that I had previously taken a little drop of rum which my new lodger had left in his bottle the night before."

"And pray how did it all end?" asked Christian, with a smile.

"Why, Captain Bluff proved that he had never promised, but had only thrown sheep's-eyes at the young lady. So he left the court triumphant, with a lot of Margate and Ramsgate steam-boat Captains; and they had a grand dinner at Blackwall—while Mrs. Chowley had to pay all the costs. Ah! it made a hole into the profits of the baby-linen, I can tell you! But dear me, to think that Mr. Redcliffe should have been a lord after all—and that since he should have married a Queen! So I've had a real Duke and a real Lord living at my house; and all the neighbours look up to me as something very superior indeed."

"And what of your friend Mrs. Sifkin?" asked Christian, still speaking with a smile at Mrs. Macaulay's garrulity.

"Oh! she and me are more at loggerheads than ever," responded the worthy woman: "she's so jealous and envious, you know!—and when she hears from the neighbours how I've had the honour of being received here to-day, I'm sure it will drive her stark staring mad, if anything in this world *can!* I hesitated at first whether to come and pay my respects: but at last I said to my new servant, says I, 'Jane, Captain Flasher'—that's my new lodger—'Captain Flasher doesn't dine at home to-day: so you may just give me an early dinner off his cold beef—which won't keep till to-morrow—and then I'll prank myself off and go and call at Marchmont House.'—Captain Flasher is a very nice man, and doesn't think of locking up the tea-caddy or decanting his own wine, or any meanness of that sort. Ah, my lord, you remember those odious Johnsons, who had my second floor? Well, they've actually gone to live with Mrs. Sifkin; and I'm so glad of it! It's almost the worst punishment I could wish the woman for all her slander and bad conduct towards myself. They'll punish her with their meanness, I'll be bound!"

In this manner did Mrs. Macaulay rattle on until the young Duke and Lady Christina Vivian began to get tired of her gossip,—when they gave her luncheon; and she shortly afterwards took her departure, bearing with her several presents which the twins made her. On returning to her own abode, she purposely got up a wrangle with the cabman in respect to the amount of the fare, in order that she might have an opportunity of reminding him over and over again, that she had been to Marchmont House and back. Her object was thus to proclaim the fact not merely for the immediate behoof of her neighbours, but likewise for that of passers-by: and when she had said the same thing in a very loud voice a dozen times over, she ended by paying the cabman his full demand, with sixpence extra,—a piece of generosity on her part which must be taken as a proof of the excellent humour into which her visit had put her.

A couple of days after the visit of Mrs. Macaulay, the young Duke of Marchmont was favoured with the company of some other old acquaintances. It was about two o'clock when three individuals, of unmistakable foreign aspect, presented themselves at the entrance of the mansion in Belgrave Square. Their raiment was not remarkable for any of those attractions which constitute "fashion" in respect to the masculine garb. On the contrary, it seemed as if the Holywell Street of some Continental city might be referred to as the source whence emanated the garments of those three personages. Truth compels us to declare that they looked as if they were the most devoted disciples of the Genius of Seediness. As for linen, an exceeding maliciousness might be inclined to represent that they wore none at all; though a more charitable surmise would only go to the extent that it was too dirty to be displayed. Their coats were buttoned completely up to their throats; and neither inside their stocks of rusty black nor the sleeves of those coats could the slightest glimpse be caught of linen, calico, or long-cloth. At the same time that they presented themselves at the entrance of Marchmont House, the hall-porter became aware of a somewhat strong odour, compounded of onions, tobacco-smoke, and perspiration; and he made a wry face, for his nostrils were unaccustomed to such a scent in the aristocratic region of Belgrave Square.

The three worthies at once saw that the porter both sniffed and eyed them suspiciously: whereat they drew themselves up with the mightiest airs of importance—and with their somewhat dirty hands began stroking their beards and playing with their moustaches. Then one of the gentlemen said to the porter, "We sall be calling for to ask for his Grace, de yong Duke of Marchmont."

"His Grace is engaged," answered the porter somewhat curtly, although he was naturally a very civil, obliging, and well-behaved man: for otherwise he would not have been retained in Christian's service.

"Den we sall be for to wait," said the individual who was acting as spokesman. "You not know us. We vare great men in our own country—great men in our Faderland."

The porter looked as if he thought that it was a great pity they ever came out of their Fatherland: for he was by no means inclined to believe that they could be great personages in England.

"You sall be having de honour of knowing me, mine goot mans," continued the spokesman. "We are de Chevalier Gumbinnen, de Lord Chamberlain of dat high and mighty Prince de reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Dis am de Chevalier Kadger, de Equerry to de same Grand Duke; and dis am de Count Frumpenhausen, de Gold Tick to him Royal Highness de vare same Grand Duke."

The hall porter placed his hand to his forehead with a bewildered air, as all these magnificent titles were as mercilessly and overpoweringly hurled at him: but still there was that exceedingly unaristocratic odour infecting the atmosphere, and producing with the unfortunate hall-porter a sensation of sickness.

"What do these fellows want?" asked a powdered lacquey, coming forward. "There! be off with you, my good man," he added, proffering the Chevalier Gumbinnen a few pence. "The police are very strict in respect to beggars and vagrants in this quarter of the town; and if you are taken up you will be sent to the House of Correction."

"Beggars, begar!" cried the Chevalier Gumbinnen, plunging his fingers into his whiskers, grasping them wildly, and tearing at them as if they were mad. "De insult is one for which you sall be sent off vid one flea in your ear! You mans not know us. We vare great men in our country—we vare rich—we great lords—we belong to de Court of de brudder of your Prince Albert."

The footman stared at this announcement for a moment; but suddenly bursting out into a laugh, he said good-naturedly, "Well, you are three of the rummest fellows for begging impostors that I ever saw!"

The Chevalier Gumbinnen gave vent to his rage in another attack upon his red whiskers: but the Chevalier Kadger stepped forward, presenting a very dirty card, and saying, "You sall take dis to your master, young mans; and you sall soon see de wonderful effect dis name sall be for producing."

"You had better take up the card, John," said another lacquey, who had just stepped forward, and who spoke these words in an audible tone. "I have heard something of these fellows before."

The footman to whom the card was given, accordingly took it up to the drawing-room where Christian was seated,—Christina being engaged with some young lady-friends in the music-room at the time.

Our young hero was astonished as well as annoyed to find that his former acquaintances of Mivart's Hotel had turned up again. He however thought it would be too discourteous to refuse to grant them an interview; and he bade the footman conduct them up to the drawing-room. The three Germans accordingly made their appearance—and a very shabby one it was. The young Duke of Marchmont could not help thinking that if they were really still attached to the household of the reigning Sovereign of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, the fortunes of that high and mighty potentate must have experienced considerable dilapidation. But he had not many instants for any deliberate reflection at all,—inasmuch as the Chevalier Gumbinnen darted forward and seized Christian in an embrace, with which, considering the mingled savour of onions, cubas, and perspiration, he could have very well dispensed.

"Mine vare goot friend!" exclaimed the Chevalier; "you sall be for breaking mine heart with vare great joy for again to see you!"

"Begar! his Grace sall have much improved! Him quite de great nobleman!"—and now it was the Chevalier Kadger who took his turn in bestowing an affectionate embrace.

"Mine noble friends! mine vare goot friends!" cried Frumphenhausen, preparing to inflict the same token of warm feeling towards the young Duke: but he was disappointed—for Christian, finding these compliments to be intolerable, hastily stepped behind the table; and pointing to chairs, requested his three visitors to be seated.

The Chevalier Gumbinnen—who at the time of their former acquaintance could scarcely speak a word of English, but who had since picked up a crude smattering thereof—continued to act as spokesman. He explained how delighted himself and his companions were when on arriving in England a few days back, they accidentally learnt that the former secretary to their illustrious master was now Duke of Marchmont. The Chevalier went on to say that the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha was coming in the course of the week to pass some little time in the British metropolis; and that his Royal Highness had therefore sent over those three officers of his household to have everything in readiness at Mivart's Hotel by the time of his arrival. Hence their presence in London; and as a matter of course (according to the Chevalier Gumbinnen's account) they could not possibly avoid the pleasure of paying their respects to the Duke of Marchmont.

Christian listened with a cold reserve: for he knew very well that Gumbinnen, though in England a Chevalier and a Lord Chamberlain, was when in Germany nothing but a valet—that the Chevalier Kadger, in England an equerry, was in Germany a footman—and that Frumpenhausen, a Count and a Gold Stick when on his travels, was in his own native land a lacquey with a brass-headed cane. The young Duke of Marchmont moreover knew that these beggarly fellows were capable of any meanness in order to obtain money or refreshments; and that although they could not help their miserable poverty yet that they had no right to assume the titles and the consequence which they affected on the British soil. He was resolved therefore not to offer them so much even as a glass of wine, nor to give them any encouragement to renew their visit.

"You vare nice house here, milor," said the Chevalier Gumbinnen, looking around the room. "You sall be remembering de bottles of wine we was used to drink togeder when we was such vare goot friends. Ah, mine goot lord! dat was at de hotel: but now you sall be having de wine in your own cellar; and all you sall have to do is just for to ring de bell, and up comes the champagne. It vare hot to-day—and me vare tirsty."

"Begar! it sall be vare hot," said the Chevalier Kadger; "and dat—how you call it?—de lonch which we sall have eaten was vare salt. We sall be vare dry! Yes—himmel! me be tirsty as de dayvil."

Not choosing to take any of these hints, Christian said, "I saw your friend Baron Raggidbak some time ago, in a condition——"

"Ah! dat Raggidbak vare great raskal!" ejaculated Gumbinnen: "him great scamp—him big tief—him vare bad man indeed!"

"Him dam bad!" added the Chevalier Kadger emphatically.

"Him make way wid de splendid harness of his Royal Highness!" cried Frumpenhausen.

"I believe," said Christian, very quietly addressing himself to the Count, "that you had some little unpleasant adventure at Buckingham Palace on the night of the supper?—or at least such was the rumour on the occasion."

"It all lies!" exclaimed Frumpenhausen, colouring tremendously. "De peoples sall be vare scandalous at times about us great folks. De Inglis newspapers vare wicked! dey tell de great lies! If dey was in our Faderland, dey go to gaol, and de journals dey sall be—what you call it?—suppressed! Me tell your lordship one great, great secret," continued Frumpenhausen, assuming a most confidential air. "His Royal Highness our Grand Duke he sall be coming over to dis country for to make de representations—you understand, milor?—to his vare goot brudder de Prince Albert, dat de Inglis press too free; and you sall be for seeing dat de Prince Albert use his influence wid de Gobernment to put down your free press."

"Never!" exclaimed Christian warmly. "If the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha entertains such an idea, he never was more mistaken in his life. As for me, I am without prejudices: but since you have assumed an air of confidence, I must tell you very plainly that judging from what I saw of your master when I was in his service, the less frequently he visits the British realm, the more agreeable ought it to be to the British people."

"Vare goot! vare goot!" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "De oftener he sall come to England, de more agreeable to de British peoples! Dat is excellent! But sall I ring de bell, milor, for dat wine you was so kind for to offer us, as we are so tirsty?"

"I must tell you very frankly," answered the Duke of Marchmont, rising from his seat, "that I have no longer any time to bestow upon you."

"Vare goot!" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen: "dat is excellent! You vare sorry, milor, your time sall be so precious. Well den, we no intrude. Ah, begar! me forgot my purse! Me have some tings to buy for his Royal Highness; and your Grace sall be so goot as to be for going to lend me de five guineas I sall be wanting."

"You must apply to some one else as your banker," answered Christian coldly.

"Ah! vare goot!" cried the Chevalier Gumbinnen: "we sall be for going to de banker! We sall be too late; and we sall be for taking de cab. Your Grace sall be so goot as to lend us de loose silver for to pay for de cab."

Christian disdainfully tossed some silver upon the table; and there was immediately a scramble on the part of those high officers attached to the Court of the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Our young hero, infinitely disgusted, rang the bell somewhat violently, and walked to the window. The Count and the two Chevaliers shook their heads at one another, as much as to imply that they had got all they could expect from the young nobleman; and they accordingly took their departure from Marchmont House. Adjourning to some tavern in the neighbourhood, they forthwith began to regale themselves on tobacco and pots of beer—in which refreshments they expended the whole of the money received from Christian.

It was perfectly true that they had come to prepare the way for the arrival of that wretched ducal pauper, the master whom they served; and were it not that the proprietor of Mivart's Hotel was afraid of offending the British Court and Aristocracy, apartments in that establishment would *not* have been placed at the disposal of the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha and his suite of beggarly tatterdemalions. We should add that the fellow calling himself Count Frumpenhausen, had been reinstated in the favour of the Grand Duke after the supper-adventure at Buckingham Palace, and that on coming over to England on this present occasion it was hoped that incident would have been forgotten. Great therefore was the vexation of the two Chevaliers and Count on finding that the young Duke of Marchmont made allusion thereto in so pointed a manner.

CHAPTER CII.

CAPTAIN STANLEY.

The reader cannot have forgotten how Captain Stanley rescued Christina from the power of the Barker in the lane near Shrubbery Villa, Notting Hill. The young officer was at once smitten with a feeling of interest on behalf of that beauteous girl; and he had solicited permission to call at the villa. Christina had assured him that Queen Indora would give him a welcome reception; and she thus, with the strictest propriety and modesty, avoided the encouragement of a visit to herself specially. But almost immediately after that incident which rendered them acquainted, came the hurricane of events that was to accomplish so material a change in the circumstances of the twins. For some few weeks Captain Stanley saw Christina no more: but after awhile he met her again at Marchmont House; and the interest he had at first experienced in her, quickly expanded into a still more tender feeling.

Now in his twenty-fifth year, Robert Stanley was remarkably handsome. His countenance not only possessed the perfection of masculine beauty—but it likewise seemed as a mirror to reflect all the generous emotions of his soul. Of the highest principles, of untarnished reputation, of a lofty intelligence, and of fascinating manners—as well as being the heir to a wealthy baronetcy—Captain Stanley might have almost made his own choice of a wife amongst the beauties of the society which by his position he frequented: but never until he beheld Christina had he seen one of her sex who made any impression upon his heart. It was therefore a first love that he now experienced; and the more he was enabled to study the character and disposition of the young Duke of Marchmont's sister, the better did he appreciate her worth, and the more did she become endeared to him by her many amiable qualities.

A strong friendship had sprung up between the young Duke of Marchmont and Captain Stanley; and the latter therefore gladly availed himself of this circumstance to visit frequently at the mansion in Belgrave Square. The regiment to which he belonged was now quartered at Hounslow; and therefore a short ride at any time took the young officer to Marchmont House. Notwithstanding the manly frankness of his disposition, there was a considerable degree of diffidence associated with the feelings of his love for Christina. The natural delicacy of his mind moreover suggested to him that he ought not to proffer his attentions too pointedly while the young lady still wore a deep mourning garb on account of the incidents that had lately occurred at Oaklands; and the same reason prevented him from confidentially whispering to her brother that her beauty and her good qualities had made so strong an impression upon his heart. Thus, as several weeks passed on, the young Duke of Marchmont suspected not that Robert Stanley was enamoured of his sister; while Lady Christina Vivian herself was equally unsuspicious that she had thus become the object of his attachment.

Six months had now elapsed since the memorable events at Oaklands; and the period fixed for the nuptials of the young Duke of Marchmont and Miss Isabella Vincent was close at hand. Previous to the arrival of the happy moment, Christian resolved to pass a week or ten days at Oaklands, that he might there entertain a select party of his numerous friends. Christina as a matter of course accompanied her brother; and amongst the guests were Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley, Sir Frederick and Lady Anastatia Latham, and Captain Stanley. Isabella Vincent was remaining at her mansion at Kensington, in company with an elderly female relative, making preparations for the bridal: Sir William Stanley was invited to join the party at Oaklands—but he had previously been summoned to London by the Government for some purpose with which his son remained unacquainted. We should observe that Sir William was a man of considerable influence in the northern counties,—one of which he had until within the last few years represented in

Parliament: but having been compelled to visit India, he had at the time given up his senatorial duties, and since his return from the East had found no opportunity of resuming them.

When the party assembled at Oaklands, Captain Stanley began to think that the time had now arrived when he might with propriety afford indications that he aspired to Christina's hand. The nuptials of the young Duke were approaching—the period for mourning was expiring—there was gaiety at the ducal country seat; and Stanley considered that it was no longer necessary to veil his feelings towards Christina so studiously as he had hitherto done. Be it understood that he was utterly unacquainted with everything that had passed between herself and Lord Octavian Meredith: he knew not that her affections had ever been in the slightest degree engaged; and though he had as yet no reason to flatter himself that he had made any impression upon her heart, he nevertheless imagined the field to be fairly open for an honourable courtship. He reflected, however, that a lady of Christina's rank—the sister of a Duke—might well aspire to a lofty alliance; and that both she and her brother might look forward to the time when an aristocratic coronet might by marriage grace her brows. But on the other hand Robert Stanley likewise knew that Christina had no ambition; and that where she fixed her affections, she would bestow her hand. He was likewise aware that her brother would consult her happiness rather than her interests in a more worldly sense; and thus he had no fear that his addresses would be repudiated on the ground that Lady Christina Vivian aimed at a loftier alliance.

It was on the second morning after the arrival of the party at Oaklands, that Christina rose early and rambled forth by herself in the grounds. The spring season was yielding to the warmer influence of summer: nature was all smiling around her: the spacious gardens were embellished with the choicest floral beauties—the birds were carolling blithely in the trees—the fountains were catching in their crystal jets the beams of the orient sun. The dew was still upon the grass: there was a sweet freshness in the air; and the young lady felt her spirits rise as she passed through those beauteous grounds belonging to the immense domain that owned the lordship of her brother. Proceeding beyond the gardens, she entered the fields—and insensibly continued her ramble farther than she had intended when first setting out. Presently she reached a stile, at which point she halted to survey the undulating landscape that lay beyond—when all of a sudden so strange a figure emerged from behind the hedge that Lady Christina was startled, and almost affrighted.

This was a tall woman whose emaciated frame was wrapped in the rags of beggary. In reality she was not forty years of age: but she looked at least fifty—so terrible were the ravages which houseless wanderings, care, misery, and privation had made upon her. She was emaciated to such a degree that there seemed to be naught but skin upon her bones: her cheeks had fallen in—her eyes were deeply set in their cavernous sockets—and her hair was grizzled. In respect to garments—if mere rags could be so denominated—they were only just sufficient for the purposes of decency. But there was not only misery expressed in the appearance of this creature; there was also a certain wildness of look which bespoke incipient madness or else a reckless desperation. But there was still in her dark eyes a remnant of the light which had belonged to them in other days:—and when, on so suddenly starting up from behind the hedge, she flung her glances on Christina, there was something which appeared so threatening in them that it was no wonder if the young lady felt still more frightened than she even was at first.

Christina flung a look around; she was at a considerable distance from the mansion; and no other human being but this horrible woman was within sight. Christina was smitten with the dread of being exposed to the fury of some dangerous lunatic; and though by no means inclined to childish terrors, yet she could not help wishing that she had not wandered so far from home. It was however as much from charitable motives as from this feeling of apprehension that Christina hastily thrust her hand into her pocket to draw forth her purse; and taking thence two or three pieces of silver, she proffered them to the woman. But in so doing she showed that her purse contained gold as well: and on raising her looks towards the wretched stranger's countenance, her fears were all revived or rather most poignantly enhanced at the manner in which the woman was now surveying her.

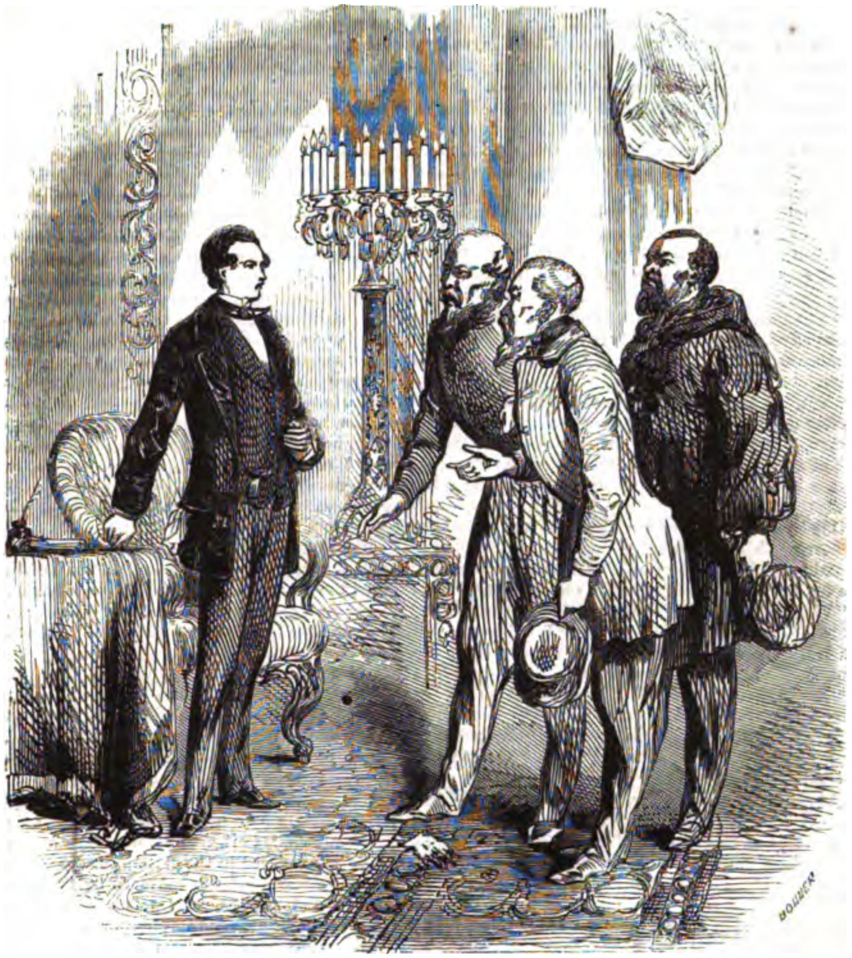
"You belong to that proud mansion," said the woman; "and you are Lady Christina Vivian. You know not how much both you and your brother are indebted to me for the recovery of your rights. But if you did know it, you would not offer me—or at least you *ought* not to offer me those miserable silver coins when your purse contains so much gold!"

"Who can you possibly be," asked Christina in astonishment, "that you in any way contributed to the results of which you have spoken? Show me that you really did what you proclaim——"

"Ah, I spoke foolishly!" ejaculated the woman: "it is not for me to tell you who I am. But by my appearance you can judge enough," she continued, with deep concentrated bitterness, "to understand that I am not amongst the fortunate ones of this life. For months past I have endured sufficient misery to crush the very life out of me,—a misery so great that if its amount were divided amongst a dozen different people, the proportion would still be intolerable for each! How often think you, young lady, that within those months of which I am speaking I have closed my eyes in rest beneath a sheltering roof? How often, think you, that I have sunk down exhausted beneath hedges or haystacks—or dragged myself painfully through fields or along roads the live-long night? And during the whole winter how much frightful wretchedness do you think has been mine? But no matter! You rich and great ones think little of the sufferings of your fellow-creatures——"

"This is not altogether true," answered Christina, gently and compassionately. "I can without the imputation of vanity or unmerited self-applause declare that never has either my brother or myself become aware of a case of distress without alleviating it."

"Then give me that gold!" cried the woman sharply,—"that gold which is in your purse! You never knew a case of distress so bitter as mine!



Give me the gold, I say—or by heaven, I will take it from you!"

Christina all in an instant recovered that spirit which was natural to her; and as there was now a look of hardened effrontery and menace in the countenance of the woman, our young heroine was determined not to yield to intimidation.

"I will not give you this gold," she responded. "Take, if you will, the silver that I have proffered you for your immediate necessities—come to Oaklands in the course of the day—convince my brother and myself that you have upon us the claims you ere now alluded to—and everything shall be done for you."

"I will not come to Oaklands—but I will have that gold!" yelled forth the woman: and the next instant she sprang over the stile.

Christina turned and fled precipitously: for there was all the ferocious wildness of a tiger-cat in the look of that woman. The latter sped in pursuit; and in a few moments she clutched Christina's shoulder. A scream burst from the young lady's lips: but at the same instant some one was seen rushing towards the spot—and Captain Stanley appeared upon the scene. It was now the woman who turned to fly: but Stanley rushed after her. She stopped short and confronted him.

"Dare to touch me," she exclaimed, "and I will tear your face as if with the claws of a wild beast!"

"Sorry am I," answered Captain Stanley, "to be compelled to lay my hands upon a woman: but you shall not escape me thus!"

A labouring man now made his appearance at the stile; and on perceiving the altercation, he rushed to the spot.

"Secure this woman!" said Stanley.

The infuriate creature made a bound at the young officer: but she stumbled and fell; and the peasant instantaneously secured her. Resistance on her part was vain; for the man's brawny arms being thrown around her, pinioned her lank arms to her side and held her powerless.

Captain Stanley hastily accosted Christina, and learnt from the young lady's lips everything that had passed between herself and the woman. As Stanley listened, an idea flashed to his mind. Who could the woman be but Barbara Smedley? She had for some time been missing—Stanley had read the handbills offering a reward for her apprehension—he remembered the description given of her—and despite the change which misery and privation had wrought in the murderess, there was still a sufficient remnant of her former self to justify the belief that she was the identical one who had just been overpowered. Besides, there was no other way of accounting for the words that she had used, to the effect that she had contributed materially to the success and development of the claims of the twins.

"Yes, it must be so!" exclaimed Captain Stanley after a few moments' reflection. "That woman, Lady Christina, is none other than the wife of a man who gave evidence before the Committee of Peers——I mean the convict Smedley."

Our heroine became paler than she was before on hearing this announcement; and she said, "Oh, Captain Stanley! how can I sufficiently thank you for having delivered me from such a wretch?"

"Woman," said the Captain, again approaching Barbara—for she indeed it was—"I know who you are. Heaven has decreed that the day of retribution should arrive at last!"

"Fool—idiot that I was," screamed forth the wretched creature, "for uttering a word that could betray me! But as well die upon the gallows as perish by starvation! And yet," she continued, now assuming a look and tone of appeal, "you might show mercy upon me, young lady; for if I had not preserved those papers which contained the mystery of your earliest days, neither you nor your brother would perhaps have succeeded——"

"Silence!" exclaimed Stanley indignantly. "Make no merit of what you did. For purposes of extortion did you keep those papers!"

Two or three other labouring men, who were on the way to their work, now made their appearance upon the spot; and as the woman was evidently of the most desperate character, Captain Stanley considered that she could not have too strong an escort. He therefore ordered these men to conduct her to the village, and there consign her into the hands of a constable; so that a justice of the peace might take cognisance of the case in the course of the day. Bab Smedley poured forth a volley of the most terrible imprecations; and Captain Stanley, proffering Christina his arm, hurried the young lady off. This was the second time that he had rendered our heroine a most important service; and she renewed in suitable terms the expression of her gratitude. Was not this an opportunity of which an admirer would take advantage? and Christina looked so eminently beautiful, with the flush of excitement now superseding the paleness of recent terror, that the young officer felt more enamoured of her if possible than ever. She had accepted his arm: but it was natural under the circumstances that she should bestow this degree of confiding friendship upon him who had delivered her from the violence of a desperate woman. His eyes were fixed admiringly upon her; and yet there was in his gaze all that respectfulness which associates itself with the love of an honourable man for a chaste and virtuous maiden.

"Lady Christina," he said, in a low, gentle, but earnest tone, "will you permit me to offer you the homage of that heart which has learnt to appreciate all your excellent qualities? Oh, deem not the moment inopportune!—and think not for an instant that I am so ungenerous as to endeavour to avail myself of the little service which has been deemed worthy of your thanks! Let me assure you that from the first instant we ever met in the neighbourhood of London, I have entertained for you the deepest interest—the highest admiration—and permit me now to add the sincerest love. Tell me, Lady Christina—may I venture to hope?"

We have already said that the young maiden was hitherto totally unaware of the sentiment with which she had inspired Robert Stanley. When therefore he began to address her in those terms, she was filled with astonishment and confusion: she could not give utterance to a word that might check him at the outset. He felt her hand tremble as it delicately rested upon his arm; and his heart beat with joy at the idea that he was not an object of indifference to her. But when he had ceased speaking, that hand was withdrawn from his arm; and Christina's countenance became deeply serious, at the same time having an expression of pain and regret.

"Captain Stanley," she replied, "I scarcely know in what terms to couch the answer that I am compelled to give you. Believe me, I am not insensible of the flattering compliment conveyed by such a proposal:——but still I cannot accept it!"

The young officer was as much astonished as he was grieved. He had not foreseen a refusal: he had not anticipated it. Without any undue vanity, he had believed in the certain success of his suit. The refusal itself was conveyed in language so reserved and ambiguous that it corresponded not with the usual candour of Christina's conduct and disposition. That she was not engaged to another, he felt morally certain; for if such engagement existed, why should it be kept secret? And again, if she loved another without as yet being formally engaged, would she not in her frankness have proclaimed the fact in order to mitigate the mortification occasioned by this refusal? But to refuse without alleging a reason, was an act so different from the idea he had formed of her character, that he was astonished at the same time that his manly pride was necessarily wounded.

"Your ladyship will at least pardon me," he said, at last breaking silence, "for having ventured to address you in such terms——"

"I think, Captain Stanley," she interrupted him, "that the way in which I answered you, must have sufficiently proven that I felt honoured and flattered by your preference; and therefore I could not be offended. No!—believe me, I am not! I feel—I know that I ought to be more explicit: but——"

She stopped short, and the tears began to trickle down her cheeks. She hastily brushed them away; and with a smile of the most amiable ingenuousness, she proffered her hand, saying, "Let us continue friends. You are the friend of my brother—you must be my friend likewise; and I shall never fail to entertain a grateful sense of the services which you have rendered me."

"Yes," said Captain Stanley, "we will be friends:"—and with an expression of manly frankness upon his countenance, blending likewise with joy, he accepted and warmly pressed the hand which was tendered him.

A conjecture—raised up in his mind by the talismanic touch of hope's creative wand—diffused that joy over his features. He fancied that he had suddenly read the mystery of Christina's conduct. She felt that she did not as yet love him sufficiently to accept his suit; but she already regarded him as a friend; and when she came to know him better, this feeling of friendship might expand into a more tender sentiment. Such was the construction which Robert Stanley put upon her behaviour; and it was natural enough. His pride ceased to be wounded—his sense of mortification was set at rest—his astonishment vanished; and he was enabled at once to begin conversing on general topics with the easy well-bred familiarity of friendship. On the other hand, Christina thought that her companion was only pursuing the course which was proper, manly, and delicate after the refusal he had just experienced; and though she felt deeply for him, yet she was well pleased at the idea that he had made up his mind to endure his disappointment philosophically and courageously.

They returned to the mansion—where the other guests were already assembled, with the young Duke, in the breakfast-parlour; and the adventure with Barbara Smedley was related to them. Christian warmly thanked Stanley for the service he had rendered his sister; and the impression left upon the minds of those to whom the incident had just been related, was to the effect that accident had taken Stanley in his morning ramble to the spot where his presence was so much needed at the instant. But the reader has doubtless comprehended that the young officer had seen Christina proceed in that particular direction; and he had purposely directed his steps in the same path that he might avail himself of the opportunity to plead his suit.

In the middle of breakfast the letters were brought in by a footman and laid upon the table. There was one for Captain Stanley. He recognised his father's handwriting, and immediately opened it. Joy overspread his countenance: for that epistle conveyed a piece of intelligence which seemed to furnish him with a stronger claim to the hand of Christina than that which, according to his own idea, he could have previously asserted. Sir William Stanley had been raised to the Peerage: he was now Lord Vandeleur; and his son was the Hon. Captain Stanley.

On communicating this intelligence, the young officer received the congratulations of all present; and after breakfast he sought an opportunity of speaking alone with the young Duke of Marchmont. They retired together to the library; and the Hon. Captain Stanley then said, "I have taken the earliest opportunity to make you acquainted that something has occurred this morning, and which must not be kept secret from your ears."

Christian looked astonished; and this surprise on his part was indeed most unfeigned.

"To see your sister," continued Stanley, "was to admire her: to know her was to learn to love her. May I hope, my dear friend, that you will not consider me too boldly presumptuous in aspiring to the hand of Lady Christina Vivian?"

"Then you have spoken to my sister on the subject?" asked Christian quickly.

"I have," replied Stanley.

"And her answer?" said the young Duke, with suspense visibly depicted on his countenance.

"Lady Christina has refused me," rejoined the Hon. Captain Stanley; "but not in such terms that forbid me from entertaining a hope. Methinks that I can read Lady Christina's sentiments aright. She will not wed where she does not feel her heart to be thoroughly engaged; and as yet she experiences for me no sentiment fonder than friendship. Have I, my dear friend, your permission to seek to render myself acceptable to your sister? As a man of honour, I considered it expedient to consult you upon the subject with the least possible delay"

Christian reflected deeply and seriously for some moments; and as he thus appeared to hesitate what answer he should give, Stanley's astonishment began to revive, as well as his sense of mortification. After all, was it possible that the character of the twins was different from the estimation he had formed of it?—were they indeed so proud of their newly acquired rank that Lady Christina would only accept the suit of some personage bearing a lofty title? Such was the suspicion which began stealing into Robert Stanley's mind; and his feelings were growing more and more hurt, when Christian suddenly addressed him.

"Before we say another word upon the subject," he exclaimed, "suffer me to have a few minutes' discourse with my sister."

Stanley bowed with a slight degree of coldness, and was about to retire, when the young Duke, seizing him by the hand, exclaimed with an air of much concern, and even of distress, "You must not for an instant suppose that I am hesitating what answer to give you so far as the subject personally regards yourself. Believe me, my dear Stanley, nothing would afford me greater pleasure—Oh, yes! a real joy," cried the young Duke enthusiastically,—"nothing, I repeat, would more delight me than that the ties of friendship which already unite us should be strengthened by such an alliance. But——"

"Not another word of explanation, my dear Marchmont!" ejaculated Stanley, infinitely relieved by Christian's frankness. "There may be family secrets——And besides, it is natural—it is proper that you should be desirous to consult your sister."

Having thus spoken, Stanley hurried from the room. Christian immediately afterwards sought his sister in her boudoir, to which she had retired. He found Christina seated in a pensive mood: indeed her thoughts were so profoundly absorbed in their topic, that she did not hear the door open. It was not until her brother was close by her side, that she was aware of his presence. Then, instantaneously assuming a smiling countenance, she welcomed him with her wonted affection.

"My dear sister," said the young Duke, "I am come to speak to you on a serious subject——"

"I can anticipate it," she answered: "and I should have taken the first opportunity to inform you of what occurred this morning, in addition to the particulars with which you are already acquainted. Captain Stanley honoured me with the offer of his hand——and I refused it."

"You refused it, my dear Christina," said the young Duke, placing himself by her side on the sofa where she was seated—taking her hand—and regarding her with the tenderest fraternal love: "You refused——but tell me why, Christina? Give me your confidence, as you have ever given it to me."

"I have no secret, Christian, unknown to you," she replied. "I regard Captain Stanley as a friend—but I do not love him as I feel that one ought to love him who is accepted as a husband. You know everything, my dear Christian!—you know why I do not love Robert Stanley, and why I cannot love him!"

Thus speaking, the young maiden threw her arms about her brother's neck; and she reposed her blushing countenance upon his shoulder.

"Tell me, my sweet sister—tell me," he softly asked, "does your mind still cherish an image which, in spite of all your virtue and purity, made its impression there?"

"No, Christian—no!" responded his sister, raising her head and meeting his gaze with the steadiness of one conscious that she was speaking the truth, and proudly satisfied with herself that she was enabled to proclaim such a truth. "I have succeeded in triumphing over that weakness—that criminal folly on my part. I was resolved to exercise all my mental energies; and heaven assisted me. I prayed fervently—Oh! how fervently—for that assistance; and it was vouchsafed! To me Lord Octavian Meredith is now nothing more than one whom I can look upon as a friend."

"Oh! God be thanked for this assurance!" exclaimed Christian, rapturously embracing his sister. "But are you sure, my sweet Christina, that you are not miscalculating the strength of your own mind—that because in the purity of your thoughts you wish it to be strong, you deem that it really is so?"

"Believe me, Christian," she answered, "I am not deceiving myself any more than I am deceiving you. There was a duty to be performed; and it has been accomplished. Oh, my beloved brother! do you not think that the knowledge of our mother's sad, sad history must have been fraught with moral teachings for me? How fatal to her happiness was that love of her's—a love which endured after she became the wife of another! Could I, then, be otherwise than appalled, frightened, and dismayed by the contemplation of that sentiment which I was experiencing for one who is the husband of another? I grappled with it as if it were a serpent which had coiled itself around my heart: I seized it by the throat—I strangled it—I tossed it away from me. Ah! it was a struggle, Christian!—and yet it has been accomplished! I feel—I know—in the strength of my own soul can I declare, that were I to meet Lord Octavian Meredith this moment, no change would take place within me:—my self-possession would not be outwardly assumed, but inwardly felt!"

"Christina," cried her brother, in a tone of exultation, "more welcome to me than a thousand dukedoms is the intelligence which your words have just conveyed! I know that you are incapable of speaking otherwise than with sincerity; and I now know also you sincerely feel all that you have expressed. For weeks and months past I have been anxious to speak to you on this subject: but I have not dared to approach it. I was fearful that by a single word I might revive feelings and memories which in my heart I hoped were becoming subdued and were melting away. Oh! I repeat, my beloved sister, the joy which I now experience is greater than language can express!"

"And I, my dear brother," answered the affectionate girl, "am proud as well as happy that I can look you in the face and in the sincerity of my soul give you these assurances. Oh! all the events which came upon us a few months back with the rapidity of a succession of hurricanes, produced a marvellous effect upon me. I have learnt that the soul cannot be strong unless the resolve be previously taken that it *shall* become strengthened: I have learned to comprehend the maxim that 'heaven only helps those who help themselves.' *Zoe's* letters enable me to comprehend that Lord Octavian himself has entered fully into the path of duty: he appreciates all the excellent qualities of his amiable and loving wife; and their happiness is now complete. Could I, even with the slightest remnant of a selfish sentiment, again threaten their felicity? Heaven forbid! If I did not feel how strong in moral purposes I have become, I should be the most unhappy of creatures!"

"Then why not, Christina, accept the addresses of the Hon. Captain Stanley?" asked the young Duke.

The maiden shook her head—and replied, "The effort which it has cost me to crush one sentiment in my heart, seems to have closed the avenue for the entrance of another. I repeat that I can regard Captain Stanley as a very dear friend—but nothing more. Besides, Christian," added Christina, remorsefully, "even if it were different—even if I felt that I *could* love Captain Stanley—I would not accept his suit without previously making him acquainted with all that has passed. I would keep no secret from him whom I consented to accompany to the altar."

"There again spoke my pure and noble-minded sister!" exclaimed Christian. "You cannot do otherwise than admire the many noble qualities of Robert Stanley. He is intelligent—he is generous-hearted—his character is unimpeachable—his life is immaculate. He possesses rank, and wealth, and personal beauty—though these last considerations, I know, must weigh little with you, my dear sister, in comparison with the former. Although you have so grandly triumphed over one sentiment in your heart, you may not be enabled to comprehend that heart of yours so thoroughly as to arrive at the conclusion that it may never love again. At least you will confess to me that if, in some supposed case, it were your destiny's decree that you should choose a husband from amidst the present circle of your acquaintance, your choice would fall upon Robert Stanley? Yes—you do not deny that it would be so! Let him therefore study to win your affections: let him not depart hence with the idea that there is no hope for him! Tell me, sweet Christina, that it shall be as I now suggest;—and if the result should prove in accordance with my expectations, no secret shall be kept from him—all the past shall be candidly confessed—and I have much misread his character if the revelation will alter his sentiments towards you."

Christina reflected profoundly for some few moments; and then she said,—her countenance brightening up with the resolve at which she had arrived,—"I see, my beloved brother, that you wish me to pursue a particular course; and I will not throw a damp upon your own spirits by refusing compliance. When you entered this room just now, you found me thoughtful. I was giving way to regret—I may even add to remorse—that a sentiment should have ever entered my heart——"

"Of *that*, dearest sister," interrupted Christian, "we will speak no more! But on the other point, what is your decision?"

"Captain Stanley," replied Christina, "is all manly frankness, and must be dealt with in the same spirit. If a hope must be encouraged in his mind, let him know the whole truth at once. But tell him, Christian—tell him," added the young maiden, "that never did I willingly listen to the language of love from Lord Octavian's lips—that the sense of duty was ever paramount in my mind—and that never for a single instant did he receive encouragement, by look, word, or deed, on my part. And now go to him at once!"

The brother again embraced the sister; and he hurried from her boudoir. He sought Captain Stanley: the explanations which he gave were frank and complete. The young officer now comprehended wherefore Christina had refused him without at the time entering into explanations of her own accord and with her own lips: he understood likewise why Christian had himself appeared to hesitate when in the library his assent was asked that he (Stanley) might pay his addresses to his sister.

Every exulting hope was resuscitated in the heart of the young officer; and he warmly expressed his gratitude for Christian's intervention on his behalf. The young Duke was not mistaken in the estimate he had formed of his friend's character and disposition: for Robert Stanley experienced no diminution of his love for Christina after all he had just heard. The young Duke returned to his sister, who had remained in her boudoir; and with joy expressed upon his countenance, he exclaimed, "I have now every hope that I shall at no distant time behold you the bride of Robert Stanley!"

CHAPTER CLII.

THE MAIDEN'S BRIDGE.

It is a long time since we spoke of the beautiful Isabella Vincent, otherwise than by casual mention of her name. We must now say a few words concerning her proceedings since she inherited the vast domains and riches of the Lascelles family.

The reader cannot have forgotten how eminently she deserved that epithet *beautiful* which we have just applied to her—or how all worthy she was to become the bride of the youthful wearer of the Marchmont coronet. With a countenance that had exceeding sweetness of expression as well as faultless regularity of features—with the deep blue eyes full of candour and innocence, and shaded by their thickly fringing lashes—with the brilliant transparency of her complexion, and the softest tint of the rose upon her cheeks—and with the rich abundance of the glossy dark brown hair showering in myriad ringlets upon her shoulders, she was indeed a being whom it was bliss to contemplate. When first we introduced her upon the stage of our story, there was a certain soft pensiveness and holy melancholy, so to speak, upon Isabella's countenance: but this expression had now well nigh passed away—for naught had she to mar her happiness. In a worldly point of view her's was a brilliant position; for she had domains and wealth of her own, and she was about to be allied to one who possessed still larger domains and still greater wealth, and who could place a ducal coronet upon her brow. In the feelings of her own heart she was likewise blest: for she was to espouse him whom she had so fondly and faithfully loved; and she had the satisfaction of beholding the once obscure Christian Ashton now elevated to one of the loftiest pedestals to which human ambition could aspire to ascend. Looking back but for a comparatively short space of time, Isabella beheld herself a poor and humble dependant upon her uncle's bounty, inhabiting an obscure lodging, and apparently without a friend in the whole world. Under such circumstances was it that she had first known him who was shortly to lead her to the altar. She had become rich before fortune smiled upon him; and her love had existed the same:—not for a single instant had she hesitated to assure the poor and dependant Christian that her chiefest joy in inheriting wealth was that she might be enabled to bestow it all upon him; and thus the deepest gratitude had become blended with the love which he experienced for her. Then when fortune suddenly showered its choicest gifts upon Christian's head, how rejoiced—Oh! how unfeignedly rejoiced was our young hero at his ability to prove that he was deserving of all that love which Isabella had cherished for him. Thus, never had the day fixed for the bridal of any young couple approached under more auspicious circumstances: but before we arrive at the description of that bridal, it is necessary to mention a few incidents of an anterior date.

Isabella was at Ramsgate when the intelligence reached her that the death of her cousin the young Earl of Lascelles and of her aunt, the Countess, had suddenly put her in possession of all the wealth of the family to which she belonged. She immediately repaired to the mansion at Kensington, and was duly received as its owner. She was thus scarcely seventeen when she inherited that great wealth. The family solicitor—a man of the highest respectability—undertook the conduct of her affairs; and his professional duties were performed with the strictest regard to the best interests of his client. She remained altogether at Kensington, until Christian went to Oaklands for the development of the grand but fearful events that were to put him in possession of a dukedom. Then Isabella determined to avail herself of the opportunity to visit her Bloomfield estate, which was situated at a distance of about thirty miles from London. Thither she repaired; and the domestics, together with all the tenantry, were assembled in front of the mansion to receive her. It was already known amongst them that the heiress was young and beautiful: but little had they expected to behold one *so* beautiful. She was clad in a mourning garb for those relatives whose death had enriched her; and the sable garments seemed admirably to set off the sylphid symmetry of that tall slender figure which was so gracile and elegant. But the sweetness and affability of her manner, as she acknowledged the felicitations of her tenants and of her menials, interested them even more than the exquisite beauty of her person; and she was at once endeared to their hearts.

Being already well acquainted with the affairs of the Bloomfield estate, she experienced infinite pleasure in confirming the domestics in their respective situations, and in dealing forth promises amongst the tenants. Improvements were to be effected at her own cost upon their lands—leases about to expire were to be renewed on terms most advantageous to the recipients of these favours; and, in a word, those who had gathered to welcome Miss Vincent's presence, had every reason to be satisfied with her demeanour, her conduct, and her language towards them.

On the day after her arrival at Bloomfield, the youthful heiress went forth, attended by her steward, to visit those points of interest which belonged to the grounds immediately attached to the mansion. She wished to see the spot where her cousin and her aunt had perished—and likewise the village-church where their remains slumbered in the family vault. Although the wintry season was close at hand, yet still the scenery was sufficiently picturesque to interest Isabella; and her imagination could easily supply the charms with which it was invested in the summer. As she proceeded with the steward in the direction of the scene of the tragedy, she conversed with him in respect to its details.

"To tell you the truth, Miss," said the steward, "I purposely suppressed some few facts when examined at the Coroner's Inquest. I did not however wilfully tell any falsehoods: but I thought that the family honour would be saved by keeping back some of the truth. And so, as you doubtless read, Miss, a verdict of *Accidental Death* was returned—though there is every reason to believe that the real truth was otherwise."

"And what were those facts which you suppressed?" inquired Isabella, who could not possibly be angry with the steward for his conduct on the occasion, inasmuch as his motives were purely good.

"I happened, Miss, to be the first to discover the tragic event," he replied. "I had some business to transact with Farmer Johnson at his house yonder——you see it near that windmill, Miss——and I was returning on horseback by the side of the dell. From a height overlooking that abyss, I perceived an object that at once struck me as sinister. I sprang from my horse—fastened the bridle to a tree—and descended into the dell. As I with some difficulty crept down the almost precipitous height, I discovered with horror and consternation what the object was—or rather I should say what the objects were which had attracted my notice. There, in a shallow part of the stream—their farther progress stopped by stones, or fragments of the height which had fallen down—lay the young Earl and the Countess. The arms of her ladyship were clasped tightly around his neck: the hands were joined by the intertwining fingers as firmly as if they were an iron vice!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Isabella, with a feeling of horror and affright; "what could it have meant? Was it really a double suicide after all?—for a rumour, you know, to that effect prevailed at the time, until the Coroner's Inquest set it at rest."

"It must have been a double suicide, Miss," answered the steward: "for how else can we account for the fact which I am relating?"

"But suppose," suggested Isabella, "that the Countess might have first accidentally fallen into the stream—the Earl may have precipitated himself into the water to save her — she in her desperation may have clung to him in the manner in which you found them—and thus they both met with their death."

"It may have been so, Miss," responded the steward; "and I sincerely hope it was, for the sake of their souls' repose. It would be better to be enabled to imagine that it was all an accident, rather than wilful self-destruction. At all events, it is certain that it took place from the bridge, which you will presently see."

"And how was that certainty acquired?" asked Isabella.

"Because the Countess's kerchief was afterwards found in the middle of the bridge; and a piece of her dress was fluttering to a nail that projected from the side of a plank. The kerchief itself had caught a splinter of an upright post which supported the rail in the middle; and it was just there that the piece of the dress was found fluttering. *That* therefore was the spot whence the Countess had plunged into the foaming tide beneath—but whether accidentally or wilfully is a point which perhaps can never be with certitude cleared up. At all events, Miss, I was determined to suppress that fact to which I have already alluded, and which could not have failed to strengthen the suspicion which prevailed at the time that it was a suicide. The two forms were partly out of the water and partly in it, when I found them. The countenance of her ladyship was singularly placid and serene: that of the young Earl was expressive of an indescribable horror. It seemed as if having died with that expression upon his features, it remained indelibly stamped there. I separated the arms of the Countess from his neck; and I can assure you, Miss, it was no easy task; for the fingers were rigid, and they were so firmly interwoven as it were that I was compelled to use more violence than one likes to exhibit towards the dead, in order to get them asunder. I laid them side by side on the slope rising from the stream to the foot of the precipitous height; and then I sped for assistance."

By the time this narrative was finished, Isabella and the steward reached the grove through which the path went slightly winding towards the bridge. The grove consisted chiefly of fir-trees; and as these retained their verdure, they formed a screen veiling the bridge until a turn in the path suddenly brought the young lady and the steward in sight of it. The gurgling of the waters in the depth of the abyss met their ears; and Isabella shuddered at the thought that in those depths her relatives had met their doom!

"The bridge has now two rails, you perceive, Miss," said the steward: "but at the time when the event took place, it only had one. Immediately after the occurrence I ordered another to be fixed up; and the passage of the old bridge is now somewhat safer—though an incautious, a timid, or a tipsy person might still easily slip through."

"Let the building of the new bridge be added to the list of improvements which I suggested yesterday," said Isabella.

"It shall be done, Miss," answered the steward, with a respectful bow.

Isabella now entered upon the bridge; and the steward pointed out to her where the handkerchief was found and where the piece of the dress was discovered fluttering. The young lady looked down shudderingly into the depth where the torrent, swollen by recent rains, was eddying and foaming: but she soon raised her eyes, for her brain grew dizzy.

"You perceive, Miss," said the steward, indicating the contrary direction, "where the side of the dell rises into that eminence. There is a bridle path along there. It was much further off from the edge some few years ago: but with the falling-in of the earth it is getting nearer and nearer. It was along that path I was coming when I caught sight of the two bodies—which however at first seemed only *one* object—in the depth below. You may observe where a stunted tree grows sloping out from the precipitous side of that eminence. A few yards on this side of the exact spot which it overhangs, lay the corpses, which the force of the torrent had swept thither until the stones arrested their farther progress. It is singular," added the steward, with a significantly sombre look, "but there is a legend attached to this bridge; and your two relations, Miss, formed the second pair who were found in that very spot, the female with her arms clasped tight round the neck of her male companion:—and hence the name of the Maiden's Bridge."

"Indeed, this is singular!" said Isabella, a thousand circumstances connected with the deceased Adolphus and Ethel rushing in unto her memory. "I never heard that legend: have the goodness to recite it while we slowly pursue our walk on the other side of this bridge; for my brain feels dizzy while I stand here."

"And by crossing the bridge, Miss," rejoined the steward, "you will behold the very cottages with which the legend is likewise associated."

The steward then proceeded to tell the tale which is already known to the reader; and if he did not embellish it with such poetic language as that which Adolphus had used when reciting the tale to Ethel, he nevertheless preserved all the facts; so that Isabella listened with a profound attention. By the time the narrative was finished, they reached the vicinity of the cottages; and the steward remarked, "By the bye, Miss, I was going to mention to you that a poor shepherd who inhabits one of these dwellings, has his wife exceedingly ill. I have done a great deal for the woman: the doctor has attended her—I have sent her all kinds of necessaries: but she seems in a very low way; and it would perhaps cheer her if you would condescend to look in upon her."

"Ah! most willingly shall I perform this duty," said Isabella. "Let us enter the habitation of the invalid."

They entered it accordingly. It was a small cottage, having only two rooms, the inner one of which contained the shepherd's wife. She was a woman of about forty—pale and emaciated with illness; her husband was absent at his work: their daughter—a girl of twelve or thirteen—was attending upon her invalid mother. The steward remained in the outer room, while Miss Vincent entered that where the invalid occupied a comfortable bed—thanks to the generosity of Isabella's humane intendant.

When Miss Vincent announced herself, the woman was greatly affected by what she conceived the honour thus done her: but the young lady gave her to understand that she regarded it merely as a duty which, as the owner of the estate, she was performing. The invalid was in a low and desponding way, as the steward had already intimated; and it was only with a sickly smile that she expressed her thanks for the assurance made by Isabella that she should not be neglected.

All of a sudden the woman said to her young daughter, "Go into the other room, my dear child: I wish to speak to our kind benefactress, alone."

The girl obeyed the mandate; and when the door in the partition closed behind her, the invalid woman, raising herself up in the bed, looked earnestly at Isabella—and said, "I have something, Miss, that lies heavy on my mind—something I have longed to tell, but have not dared. As yet only my husband knows it; and he bade me keep silent. But you have spoken such kind words to me, and your looks are so sweet and amiable, that I feel I must tell the secret to you."

"What is it?" asked Isabella, with the awe-inspiring apprehension that she was about to listen to the revelation of a crime.

"I do not know that I have done anything very, very wrong," resumed the woman: "but still I have been afraid, because——"

"Tell me what you have to say," interrupted the young lady, full of anxiety; "and I will candidly give you my opinion upon your conduct, whatever it may have been."

"I am about to speak, Miss, of something that happened here—I mean in the dell——"

"The death of my relations?" interjected Isabella, in feverish suspense.

"Yes, Miss," responded the woman. "I never told any one except my husband: but—but—I heard and saw it all!"

"You?" said Isabella. "But what did you hear and see? Tell me quickly.—No, no! my poor woman, I am wrong thus to excite you! Take your leisure:—forgive my impatience!"

"This is how it happened, Miss. I had been down to the Manor on some message from my husband to the steward; and instead of returning by the regular path through the grove, I took a shorter cut to bring me to the bridge. I was within the shade of the trees: but just as I was about to step forth upon the bridge, I caught sight of the young Earl and the Countess standing together on the very middle of the plank. I thought there was something so affectionate in their manner to each other, as well as in their looks, that I was struck with a suspicion all was not right, and that they were not just upon the terms which a nephew and an aunt—especially as she herself was so young—ought to observe towards each other. Ah, Miss! I was seized with woman's curiosity: so I remained hid in the grove to watch and to listen."

"Yes, yes," said Isabella; "I understand! Your fault was venial enough. Proceed."

"Well, Miss," continued the woman, "I heard his lordship say that it was in the middle of the bridge where the event of the legend happened, according to the tale afterwards told by the young shepherd who witnessed it. And then her ladyship said—I remember her words as well as possible—'Here they fell over, the girl's arms clasped tight round the neck of him who had ruined her happiness.'—His lordship answered, 'Yes, it was here:'—and then both he and her ladyship looked over the bridge down into the stream underneath. Oh! Miss——"

The woman stopped short; and so strong a convulsive spasm shot through her, that the bed shook under her. Horror was in her countenance; and she fixed her eyes with a kindred expression upon Isabella.

"Proceed!" said the young lady, catching the infection of the same shuddering horror: for she saw that the mystery of her deceased relatives' fate was about to be fearfully elucidated.

"All of a sudden, Miss," continued the invalid woman, in a low and solemn voice, "the Countess cried, '*Forgive me, Adolphus!*' Ah, she was thinking of the legend—and she was imitating it frightfully!"

"Good heavens!" murmured Isabella, her blood running cold.

"Yes—she imitated it!" proceeded the woman. "She flung her arms round the Earl's neck; and down they went together! O God! never shall I forget the wild, wild cry that rang forth from the lips of the young Earl! But no cry came from those of the Countess! There was an awful splash—and I fell back in a dead swoon in the grove."

"Just heaven!" murmured Isabella, "what a tragedy!—how full of a wild and terrible romance! And now the mystery is cleared up! It was not an accident—it was not even a double suicide: it was a suicide and a murder! How horrible!"

"When I recovered my senses," continued the woman, "I hastened home to the cottage in affright. I felt as if I was going mad: the cry of the Earl rang in my ears and seemed to pierce my brain. I told my husband what had happened; and he implored me to keep the thing a secret. He said that we should both be punished for my curiosity, by the loss of his situation. So you see, Miss, I was afraid to come forward when the Coroner's Inquest took place; and of course, having kept back then, I have held my tongue ever since. It has preyed upon me; and I do really believe it is this that has made me ill. Several times, when I have received kindnesses from your steward—who is a most worthy and excellent man—I have been going to tell him what I saw and heard on that dreadful day: but I have been frightened to do so—I was so afraid he would scold me for having watched and listened. And then too, as my husband says, since the Coroner's Inquest made it all look as if it was an accident, where was the good of giving a worse colour to it before the world? But when you came in just now, Miss, and spoke so kind to me, I could not resist the opportunity of telling you; and my mind is relieved. But I hope you are not angry?"

"I am not angry—I have no right to be!" interrupted Isabella. "After all, it is fortunate that you have kept the secret; for you have saved the honour of my two relatives!"

The woman fully understood Isabella's meaning: she saw that the young lady alluded not merely to the disgrace that would affix itself to the memory of the late Countess if it were revealed to the world that by the same act she had rendered herself a murderess and a suicide—but that Miss Vincent's remark likewise pointed to the unquestionable fact that a criminal intimacy must have subsisted between that suicide murderess and her victim.

"I am glad that your mind is easier," continued Isabella; "and I hope that now it is lightened of its load you will soon get well. Do not vex yourself any more upon the subject: keep the seal of silence still upon your lips. You need not even mention to your husband that you have made this revelation to me."

The poor woman thanked Miss Vincent for her kindness; and the young lady took her departure from the cottage, attended by the steward. The latter saw by the countenance of his mistress that something had occurred to horrify and sadden her: but he dared not put a question. The Maiden's Bridge was reached: Isabella traversed it quickly, with but one shuddering look into the foaming, eddying, water below; and when the opposite side of the ravine was gained, she said to the steward, in a low voice that was full of a solemn awe,—"The mystery exists no longer!—it is cleared up! But it was neither an accident nor a double suicide."

She then proceeded to relate all that she had heard from the lips of the invalid peasant-woman; and the steward listened with a dismayed interest. Isabella thought that she was bound thus to make him a confidant in respect to the fate of her relatives, after the generosity he had displayed in endeavouring to save the honour of the family name to the utmost of his power.

She proceeded to the village-church where the remains of those hapless and guilty lovers lay entombed; and she felt the tears stealing down her cheeks as she thought of the sad and terrible doom they had encountered. Before she departed from Bloomfield, the new bridge was commenced across the ravine; and the invalid peasant-woman,

surrounded by comforts of every kind, and rapidly recovering her health and strength, had every reason to bless the generosity of Isabella Vincent. The young lady returned to the metropolis,—having previously learnt by letter a sufficiency of the startling incidents which had occurred at Oaklands, to comprehend how important a change had taken place in the circumstances of Christian and Christina. And now some months elapsed—which interval brings us down to the date of the circumstances that occupied the preceding chapter.

CHAPTER CLIII.

LAST SCENE WITH THE GERMANS.

The week which was to be passed at Oaklands by the young Duke of Marchmont, his sister, and their guests had expired; and the twins returned to London. The day fixed for the nuptials of our young hero and Isabella was close at hand: but before we come to that point of our story, there is an incident to relate.

It was the day before the one that was to render Christian so supremely happy—and at about two o'clock in the afternoon—when, as he was seated in the drawing-room, a footman entered to announce that the three noblemen who some little while back visited his Grace, had called to solicit another audience. The footman—making sure that the Duke of Marchmont would receive them—had already ushered them as far as the outer drawing-room; and he now stood upon the threshold, holding the door half open.

"Tell those persons," said the young Duke, "that I am engaged. I decline to see them."

"Vare gout!" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen, now pushing past the footman into Christian's presence. "His Grace he sall say be by no means engaged; and his lordship he vell inclined to see his vare goot friends what sall be for loving him so vell."

The Lord Chamberlain of that high and mighty potentate, the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha, looked, if possible, more seedy than ever, and brought with him his accustomed odour of raw onions, strong cubas, and intense perspiration. He was followed by the Chevalier Kadger, who kept his right arm most mysteriously held to his side—the real truth being that there was under the armpit a rent which would have looked most unseemly when about the person of the Equerry to a reigning Duke; and it would have moreover betrayed a fact that it was just as well to keep concealed: namely, that his Excellency the Chevalier Kadger wore no shirt. Count Frumpenhausen brought up the rear; and as he had a cold, he was seized with a sneezing fit, which compelled him to blow his nose: but he was particularly cautious to turn round while using his handkerchief, which was a mere dirty remnant of a faded cotton one.

Intense was the Duke of Marchmont's disgust on beholding these three beggarly followers of a beggarly German Prince thus insolently force their way into his presence. For the first time perhaps since he himself had borne a ducal title, he assumed a hauteur most coldly dignified; and he said to the Chevalier Gumbinnen, "You have wilfully misinterpreted the words I uttered to my domestic. I do not court the acquaintance of either yourself or your companions."

"Ah, vare goot, my lord!" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "Your Grace sall be for doing one vare great favour to dat august Duke who you was once de secretare to, and who sall be so graciously pleased for to honour your Grace vid him friendship."

"We sall be for letting your Grace know," Count Frumpenhausen hastened to interject, "dat we come on de special message from his Royal Highness——Hein?"

"If that be so," said Christian, "hasten and explain yourselves; for my time is too valuable to be wasted."

"His Royal Highness," resumed the Chevalier Gumbinnen, in his capacity of spokesman, "sall be for to find himself—how you say it?—in der dayvil of a mess. His Royal Highness he sall lose in de voyage by de steamer, tree large tronks so full of his clotes dat you sall not be able for to thrust in de pin betwixt dem. Dey all tree sall be tumble overboard in one vare great lurch of de steamer—and all through de vare one great fault of de captain. But dat not all: de worser sall be for to come. De vare large strong-box full of de gelt, and de stars and orders of his Royal Highness, go down in one of dem tronks!"

"And what do you require of me?" asked Christian, half coldly, half impatiently.

"Himmel!" ejaculated the Chevalier Kadger, shrugging his shoulders, but keeping his right arm fixed as if it were nailed to his side.

"His Royal Highness," continued Gumbinnen, "not choose for to tell his vare goot brudder, de Prince Albert, of all dese mishaps; and derefore his Royal Highness sall be for honouring his vare goot friend de Duke of Marchmont by asking for de loan of a tousand guineas and de address of his Grace's tailor. Himmel, my lord! dat is de whole fact. Kadger sall be for to prove it——"

"And Count Frumpenhausen to swear to it," added our hero ironically.

"Begar! You doubt us, my lord?" exclaimed the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "Come, den, and see his Royal Highness; and you sall be for learning dat it all de fact. We was for saying to his Royal Highness dat we had seen de yong Duke de oder day—dat he receive us so kind—and dat he ask us to come anoder day and take de lonch wit him. So den his Royal Highness he sall say, 'Vare goot! Go to mine yong friends; tell him what for I sall be wanting his assistance, and how he sall be for sending me de tousand guineas and de name of his tailor.'——Hein?"

"Listen, gentlemen," said our young hero. "The tale you have just told me about the loss of the trunks is one which carries deception on the face of it. Your Grand Duke is as contemptible as yourselves—particularly in respect to the mode by which he seeks to replenish his purse. Unfortunately for the British people, he is really a German Grand Duke; and we all know it to our cost: for he never visits England without having his expenses paid from our national treasury."

Here the Chevalier Gumbinnen thought it becoming, as the Grand Duke's representative, to assume the indignant; and with a loudly ejaculated "Begar!" he advanced so close up to Christian in order to give effect to the words he was about to utter, that the strong odour which he carried about him was most sickeningly overpowering. The young Duke hastened to the window and threw it up. Just at that very moment a Punch and Judy show was passing in the Square; and it halted, immediately under the window. Then there arose a sound of the big drum and the Pandean pipes (vulgarly called a mouth organ): the young Duke tossed out half-a-crown, at the same time waving his hand for the itinerants to depart—when it struck him that he recognised the lean gaunt form, as well as the pinched hungry countenance, of the individual who was making that music. A second glance convinced his Grace that he was right. Yes!—there, with the mouth-organ tucked into his neckcloth, and the huge drum suspended by a cord over his shoulders—looking most excruciatingly unhappy—but still the most ludicrous picture of misery that can possibly be conceived—stood that once eminent and distinguished man, Baron Raggidbak!

"There!" exclaimed Christian; "there is one of your late friends!—a person who I have no doubt is in every way as deserving of a title—or of a prison for vagabondage, no matter which, as yourselves!"

The Chevalier Gumbinnen, the Chevalier Kadger, and Count Frumpenhausen rushed to the window; and thence they beheld the discarded Groom of the Stole Baron Raggidbak. The Baron himself, having his eyes turned upward while running his lips along the reeds of the mouth-organ, caught sight of his three acquaintances; and a malignant expression appeared on his previously rueful countenance. Then, too, he recognised in the young Duke of Marchmont the late secretary of his Highness the Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-

Quotha ; and some person amongst the crowd that was collecting around the Punch and Judy show, exclaimed, "There ! that's the young Duke !—that's the handsome young gentleman who a few months back inherited the Marchmont Peerage !"

"Mine Gott !" muttered Raggidbak to himself: "de yong mans sall now go for to be a Duke !"—then raising his voice, he shouted out, "Come down, you dam rascals ! What for you in de palace of one great Duke ? Him an Inglis Duke ! —you de shabby beggarly flonkies of de one great pauper German Duke ! Ah, you go tell him Royal Highness dat me get dronk and me sell de plate off de harness ! Oh, you vare great dam rascals !"

While Baron Raggidbak was thus relieving his mind of its spiteful and vindictive feelings towards the three officials of the puissant German Prince, those individuals themselves stood transfixed in astonishment and dismay at the window. When he had finished his ejaculatory objurgations, Baron Raggidbak wound all up with a wild flourish upon the mouth organ, and such a terrific blow upon the big drum that the parchment was cracked. The individual whose duty it was to stand in front of the show and carry on a pleasant discourse with Mr. Punch, was so incensed at this wanton destruction of property, that he seized upon the cudgel with which Punch was wont to inflict personal chastisement upon Judy, and he aimed a terrific blow at the sconce of Baron Raggidbak. But this illustrious personage—who now seemed inspired with a new life of some kind or another—dexterously warded off the blow, seized upon the staff, and therewith struck the Punch and Judy man to the ground—thus in a moment avenging many an insult, cuff, gibe, and practical joke which he had previously submitted to with a sullen and morose resignation. Then tossing away the mouth-organ, slipping the drum off his neck, and giving it a terrific kick which smashed in the hitherto uninjured side, he darted away as fast as his legs could carry him.

All this was the work of a very few moments; and the crowd, hugely delighted at the whole scene, cheered most lustily.

"Now," said Christian, abruptly closing the window, and addressing himself in a peremptory manner to his three German visitors, "I order you to retire ;—and I have further to inform you that if you again present yourselves at my residence, you will find the doors closed against you."

"Begar !" exclaimed the Chevalier Kadger, gesticulating violently, so that forgetting any longer to hold his arm tight to his side, he displayed the rent which he had hitherto so studiously concealed : "dis vare great insult sall be for to have satisfaction ! Dis sall be mine friend ;"—and he pointed to the Chevalier Gumbinnen. "Me fight mit de broadsword—and me pink you troo and troo——himmel !"

"Vare goot !" ejaculated Count Frumpenhausen, displaying his tattered kerchief, he being seized with a violent sneezing fit at the moment. "Dis sall be one duel—or you, my lord, sall, be for making de apology—which, begar ! sall be for de best; and you sall be for ordering de bottles of wine—de port and sherries; so we sall all make it up and be vare goot friends. It not de first time, my lord, you find us vare goot gumpany."

The young Duke of Marchmont rang the bell violently; and when a footman answered the summons, he exclaimed, "Show these persons from the house; and tell the hall-porter to take care that they never again cross my threshold."

Nothing could exceed the rage of the three Germans on hearing this mandate issued. The Chevalier Gumbinnen thrust his hands into his hair, and tore at it violently, as if he were madly intent on tearing out masses by the roots: and then, with a loud "Begar !" he rushed towards Christian to deal him a blow. But the footman sprang forward, at the same time shouting for help; and seizing the Chevalier Gumbinnen by the coat-collar at the back part of the neck, he forced him from the room. Two other tall powerful footmen instantaneously made their appearance : they laid hands upon the Chevalier Kadger and Count Frumpenhausen in a similar manner, and ejected them in the same style. When once out of their ducal master's sight, the three footmen gave free vent to their antipathies against the Germans; and from the top of the stairs to the bottom it was a series of kicks respectively administered to the hinder-quarters of those three retainers of the high and mighty Prince, the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. Through the spacious hall were the miserable Germans thus ignominiously urged along—until they were finally expelled, each with a good parting kick, from the portals of the mansion,—the whole scene being to the infinite amusement of the domestics who administered the chastisement, as well as of the others who were lounging in the hall at the time.

Now, the usage which the three Germans thus experienced, was certainly somewhat of the roughest; and the consequences were displayed in the condition of their apparel as they made their forced and ignominious exit from the ducal mansion. The Chevalier Gumbinnen had the seat of his pantaloons most uncomfortably rent; and as his coat was very short, the damage was plainly visible. Furthermore, as he wore no shirt, the incident was fraught with a still greater inconvenience: for something more than a glimpse of the filthiest pair of drawers was afforded. The Chevalier Kadger had the rent under the arm-pit most cruelly magnified; and his independence of linen, calico, or long-cloth in the shape of shirting, was likewise apparent. As for Count Frumpenhausen—who wore a great loose coat, very much in the shape of a blouse,—its strong coarse material had withstood the violence of the treatment he experienced : but his dirty rag of a handkerchief was hanging for more than three parts of its length out of his pockets. Thus, three more ignominiously comical figures it would be impossible to conceive; and to enhance their mortification, they all in a moment found themselves in the midst of the crowd which had assembled about the Punch and Judy show.

"My eyes, Bill ! here's a rum go !" exclaimed a coalheaver to a comrade also wearing a hat with a long flap down the back.

"What a lark !" yelled an urchin with an iron hoop in his hand : and in a moment the three flying Germans were assailed with all sorts of gibes, taunts, and jests.

Away they sped; and away rushed all the small boys of the crowd after them. The ranks of the pursuers were quickly recruited by other idle urchins in the thoroughfares through which the strange procession passed; and the quicker went the maddened Germans, the quicker likewise became the pace of the crowd that was hooting, yelling, shouting, and laughing at their heels.

In the meanwhile a certain high functionary connected with the British Court—but whose name and precise office it suits our purpose to suppress—was paying a private visit upon particular business to the Grand Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha at Mivart's Hotel. His Royal Highness, the illustrious reigning Prince, was clad in a very shabby uniform: but this might be accounted for by the fact that his three trunks, full of magnificent clothing, had gone down to the bottom of the sea: ——at least so the Chevalier Gumbinnen had said; and who would venture to doubt the word of such an eminent personage? His Royal Highness was seated at a table with his hands—and we fear nothing else—in his pockets: while the high functionary of the British Court was seated near the Duke, with a paper containing several *memoranda* before him. A portion of the conversation that was taking place, may not be uninteresting to our readers.

"I am sure your Royal Highness will excuse me," said the Court official, with the most urbane deference of look, tone, and manner: "I am but conveying the sentiments of your august brother——"

"I know it, my lord, I know it," interjected the Grand Duke, who, as the reader will recollect, spoke English tolerably well. "But my brother the Prince must recollect that he is in a very flourishing condition. What would he have been but for his marriage——"

"True, your Royal Highness," said the Court official. "But here"—referring to the paper before him—"we have about six thousand pounds transmitted to your Royal Highness in the course of only eight or nine months. The first thousand——"

"I have already explained to your lordship," answered the Grand Duke, "that it was expended in putting a slate roof upon my palace instead of the wretched old thatch that for years had been rotting there."

"But this second thousand?" said the Court official inquiringly.

"Why, you know, my lord," responded the Grand Duke, "that this sum went for a very delicate purpose—the redemption of my plate—you know what I mean. If I might indulge in a pleasantry, I think it is what you English would call its release from the guardianship of an uncle."

The reigning Grand Duke indulged in a loud "Ha! ha! ha!" And so the Court official—a parasite even to a pauper, so long as this pauper was a Royal one—considered himself compelled to echo it distantly with a tittering "He! he! he!"

"Well, your Royal Highness," he said, "we will not go into any farther details relative to past money-matters: but your august brother the Prince ventures through me to suggest that your Royal Highness might surround yourself with a better class of followers——"

"Indeed!" interrupted the Grand Duke haughtily: "I should advise my august brother to keep such counsel to himself. When he was in Germany, before he contracted his marriage, he was intimate with Gumbinnen—smoked cigars with Kadger—drank beer with Frumpenhausen—and delighted in a dish of sour-crout with Wronki. They are all very good fellows in their way—well-conducted and respectable. They have just gone to a grand entertainment at the young Duke of Marchmont's.—But, Ah! what is this noise?"

"Some street disturbance, no doubt," said the Court official.

The Grand Duke and his visitor hastened to the window; and heavens! what a spectacle met their view! There were those good fellows—those respectable and well-conducted men—rushing like escaped lunatics along the streets, the garments of the two Chevaliers displaying most unseemly rents, and Frumpenhausen's ragged kerchief trailing like a tail behind him. And then came about two hundred urchins and ragamuffins of every description,—yelling, shouting, hooting, and giving vent to their exuberant mirth in terms but little complimentary to the high functionaries belonging to the Court of the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha. His Royal Highness was aghast! his lordly visitor was horrified. Into the hotel rushed the three Germans; while half-a-dozen policemen, armed with their bludgeons, darted in amongst the crowd with the intention of dispersing it. This was at length done; and then the Court official, looking significantly at the reigning Duke, said, "Now, your Royal Highness must really pardon me for observing that your followers disgrace you."

"I will have justice, my lord!" exclaimed the Grand Duke, terrifically irate. "I insist that all the persons concerned in this scandalous treatment of my followers, be ordered to leave London within twenty-four hours, and England within three days, on pain of being shut up in the Tower for the rest of their lives."

"Your Royal Highness forgets," answered the Court official, "that this is not Germany."

"Then the sooner it is made like Germany the better!" exclaimed the infuriate Duke. "I am sure my brother is trying hard enough——"

"No doubt, your Royal Highness," rejoined the official; "and we are certainly making progress in that desirable direction. But still things cannot be done in this country on a sudden. We have a Constitution——"

"And what the devil do you want with a Constitution?" exclaimed the Grand Duke. "Do as we do in Germany: keep a Constitution as a sop to throw to the people when irritated—and then take it away again when the public mind has calmed down."

"The plan is certainly a good one, your Royal Highness," answered the lordly sycophant; "but unfortunately, in this country, we have a Parliament—we have laws——"

"Trash! rubbish!" ejaculated the Grand Duke, with a disgust that certainly was most unfeigned. "Get rid of them: do as we do in Germany! ride rough-shod over them! Ah! it is fortunate for you English people that I condescend to visit your shores now and then: for if it were not for the advice I give to my dear brother, I am sure I do not know what would become of you all! And yet he grumbles because I require a little money!"

At this moment the door burst open, and a tall gaunt form strode in, with the spindle-shanks clothed in a strange pair of inexpressibles. This was the Baron Raggidbak; and the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha assumed his haughtiest demeanour on beholding the discharged and disgraced functionary.

"I want my rights!" exclaimed Raggidbak, striking his fist forcibly upon the table up to which he had advanced. "Dey say me get dronk—and me no get dronk! Me only too dam glad to be for seeing anything at Quotha to get dronk upon! Nothing but small beer—dam small beer! Den dey sall say me steal de plate off de harness—de plate not worth de stealing! And why for your Royal Highness not pay my wage regular? De Ponch and Judy showman he pay my wage regular: but de Grand Duke he never have not one farden! Dat all de difference! I want my rights——"

"Begone!" exclaimed the Grand Duke: "begone, I say!—or you shall be locked up in a fortress for the remainder of your life."

"Ah! dat all vare goot in Faderland," exclaimed Raggidbak maliciously; "but dat no goot in dis contry! Your Royal Highness sall be for making me one excuse—or how you call it?—one apology; and you sall be for taking me back into your service, mit de pledge dat you sall not be for ill-treating me when we get back to Faderland."

"Now, my good fellow," said the Court official, who had no recollection of Baron Raggidbak, "you had better take yourself off—or I shall call a constable and give you into his custody."

Baron Raggidbak began to curse and swear both in English and in German: he rent his hair—he stamped and stormed—and he vowed that he would expose the characters of all the Grand Duke's officials, as well as their real position and standing in their native land, unless his Royal Highness should consent to do him justice. All these threats he uttered in English—which indeed, apart from the interjected German imprecations, was the language that he had spoken from the outset, for the express behoof of the British Court official whom he found with his Royal Highness. The unfortunate Baron proceeded to create such a tremendous disturbance, that it was deemed necessary to send for a police-officer. He was then most ignominiously given into custody: but it was not thought expedient to convey him into the presence of a magistrate, on account of the threatened revelations. The miserable Baron was therefore dragged to the office of the Home Secretary,—where, after a brief examination, a warrant was made out for his committal to Bethlem, "as a rabid and dangerous lunatic who had dealt in menaces against the august person of the reigning Duke of Maxe-Stolburg-Quotha."

A highly coloured account appeared in the daily journals, accompanied by many comments upon "the state of mind of the unfortunate nobleman, who had once filled a distinguished post at the Court of his Royal Highness, but from which he had been dismissed for malversation to the extent of some hundreds of thousands of pounds."

Had those journals been honest, they would have used the word "peculation;" and if they had been truthful, they would have represented the amount of the larceny at the value of about eighteenpence. But their great aim was to impress the public mind with the grandeur, pomp, and riches which prevailed at the Ducal Court of Maxe Stolburg-Quotha.

On the following day the Chevalier Gumbinnen, the Chevalier Kadger, and Count Frumpenhausen appeared each in a bran new suit of clothes, purchased ready-made and privately of Moses and Son; and they received a warning from their ducal master to abstain thenceforth from the habit of eating raw onions, smoking bad cubas, and going without shirts when on a visit to this country—especially to avoid getting into rows—with full permission to relapse into their old ways on their return to their own beloved Fatherland.

CHAPTER CLIV.

THE JUNGLE.

The scene changes to a far distant country. In a cloudless sky the noon-day sun was set like a huge ball of fire,—its torrid beams pouring down with a sultriness from which it would almost appear that every living thing would shrink to the nearest shade. Not a breath of air fanned the leaves: motionless they hung, as if all artificial, with stems of iron wires. Upon the pools there was not the slightest ruffle: the streams flowed so languidly that they seemed to be of quicksilver—a fluid too heavy to permit the slightest agitation upon the surface. All was likewise silent, as if the scene which we are describing was utterly untenanted by a living thing.

It was one vast wilderness of verdure, broken only by the places where the pools existed or the streams were sluggishly and almost imperceptibly gliding. Masses of underwood were interspersed with trees,—in many spots appearing singly—in others forming small groups—in others again, congregating into the extent of woods—but in the distance so thickly aggregated as to expand into the magnificence of forests. Though the atmosphere was so clear and so fully illuminated with the golden effulgence of the sun, yet was it not merely heavy with its intense sultriness; but in its stagnation there was a sense of noisomeness and disease. To breathe it was fraught with a profound oppressiveness: it seemed impossible that the lungs could become expanded with such inhalation. Breathing itself was gasping: there was no vitality in that air: it afforded not the sense of active vigorous life.

All was silent; and no evidence of the existence of any living thing met the eye of the observer—if an observer there were. And yet how different was the case! Within the dense shade of the underwood wild beasts were lazily reposing, rendered languid almost to torpor by the stifling heat. Within the cup of the wild flower some venomous little reptile was coiled up: the cobra was concealed in the grass: and what seemed to be an uncouthly swollen part of the branch of some tall tree, was in reality the boa-constrictor twisted and twined around into a loathsome slimy knot.

And there *was* an observer amidst that scene. By the side of a pool a man was seated, bathing his feet, yet half afraid to dip them into the still water for fear lest some monster should thrust up its huge head to seize upon his limbs. Parched with thirst, he drank and drank again; and yet the water refreshed him not; for it was tepid—it was warm to sickliness.

Profoundly unhappy seemed that man; and yet his was a countenance that could scarcely express anything beyond the ferocity and devilish wickedness which belonged to his character. His garments, of an European fashion, were travel-soiled; and as the man sat by that pool, he ever and anon looked around him, as if in utter consternation and dismay when the sense smote him of the stupendous loneliness and utter helplessness of his position.

Presently that dense silence was broken by the sound of something rustling in the brake on the opposite side of the pool; and the object, whatever it were, plunged into the water, which rippled sluggishly, and became still and smooth again. With what awful terror did that man spring up to his feet!—how literally did his hair stand on end!—what intense anguish, what excruciating suspense, what ineffable dread were depicted upon his countenance! An observer—if there had been one—might have forgotten his abhorrent ugliness in the sense of compassion which would have been felt for a being who evidently suffered such dire horror. And no wonder that he should so suffer!—for when that sound broke thus suddenly upon his startled ear, a thousand crucifying apprehensions swept through his brain. Was it a huge serpent about to fling out its hideous length at him and encircle him in its slimy, horrible, deadly folds?—or was it a tiger springing at him?—or was it some other monster belonging to that scene in the midst of which he found himself thus lonely, thus friendless, thus unprotected and forlorn? The scene itself was in India: the place was a jungle;—and that man was the Burker.

He had escaped from Inderabad: but now how bitterly did he curse himself for having taken that step! At least a hundred miles lay betwixt him and the capital of Queen Indora's kingdom: he might possibly retrace his way—he might go back to his fortress: but he dared not; for in order to effect his flight he had slain the sentinel who guarded the passage from which his cell opened; and he could not entertain the hope that Queen Indora or her royal husband would so far overlook the crime as to leave him in possession of his life.

Yet, on the other hand, of what value was that life amidst the horrors of this jungle? He knew not where to place himself in order to be in safety. If he sat beneath the shade of a tree, the hideous idea would creep over him that a huge snake might at any instant dart down with its tremendous length and wind its loathsome coils around him. If he sought the groves, he dreaded lest the silence should suddenly be broken by the howl of a wild beast and its claws should be struck deep into his palpitating flesh. If he made his way through the underwood, he felt every instant as if the deadly cobra were winding around his legs. If he rested himself upon the grass by the side of a stream or pool, his blood still curdled with the apprehension that some insidious reptile was gliding through the rank luxuriance of that herbage towards him. This man lived an entire age of horrors in every passing minute.

At an early hour in the morning of that day he had passed through a little village, where some bullock-drivers, cooking their rice in the public khan, had from charity given him a portion of their food. Thence journeying onward, he had insensibly plunged deeper and deeper into this wild scene of fearful beauty, which, when too late to retreat, he discovered to be a jungle swarming with the brute and reptile enemies of man.

It were vain for the Burker to ask himself what he should do: his imagination could suggest nothing—unless now and then he reflected that it were better to attempt to make his way back to Inderabad, and dare whatever fate might attend him there, than wander about in this abject wretchedness of mind to perish by the venom of a serpent, in the coils of a snake, or by the fangs and claws of a wild beast. And this reflection again occurred to the Burker after that startling incident which had filled him with such horrible apprehension by the side of the stagnant pool.

Yes—his resolve was now taken; and he began to retrace his way, as well as he could recollect it, towards the direction from which he had come. He thought that if he could only regain the village where he had received the alms of rice in the morning, he might thence trace his road back to Inderabad. But pathway in the jungle there was none; and in a very little time the Burker found that he was completely at fault concerning the direction which he ought to pursue. There certainly was a group of trees which he did not remember to have noticed before: there was a pool by which he assuredly had not passed; and there again was the ruin of some ancient temple that seemed to indicate a spot unmarked by him before. Again he sat down in a place which he fancied to be the most secure from any sudden attack on the part of reptile or wild beast; and again did he abandon himself to blank despair. It was a small open spot, denuded of verdure—with underwood at a little distance, and a clump of trees rising in the midst about forty yards off. His eyes were riveted upon those trees, because he now sat motionless, and the gaze of one in such a state of mind is wont to fix itself upon something. Yes—utterly motionless he sat, his elbows upon his knees, his hands supporting his countenance. Slowly through his mind rolled all the incidents of his life—a hideous phantasmagoria—a horrible panorama; and the wretch was appalled by the scenes that memory thus in succession conjured up. What would he give to be enabled to live his entire life over again! And yet it was not precisely remorse—but only regret which the man felt: not remorse for the crimes themselves, but regret that he should have committed them, inasmuch as his present position was one of their consequences. He cursed himself as a fool, rather than loathed himself as a criminal.

His gaze was fixed upon the clump of trees, at first vacantly—until at length something began to attract his attention. It seemed as if one long stem was in motion while the others were stationary. He strained his regards. No—it must be an illusion!—all those stems were utterly still; for how could they possibly be agitated when there was not a breath of air to ruffle the smallest of the leaves that belonged to their crowning-foliage? And yet the Burker felt as if his gaze were irresistibly retained there by some unknown fascination. Ah! again the stem of that tree appeared to move. Yes!—and now the branches themselves were shaken! The next instant all was still. The Burker sat stupified by a vague sense of terror,—his eyes riveted upon that stem. Though the ardent sun was bathing him as it were in its molten effulgence, yet was he now shuddering with a glacial chill; while the big drops burst out cold and clammy upon him. Oh, what a convulsing horror shook him with the strongest spasm as he suddenly beheld that seeming stem draw itself up from the ground and disappear amidst the foliage! Then among the branches and leaves of all those trees there was a rapid rushing—a vivid playing hither and thither—a continuous succession of bounds and leaps and springs, which shook tree after tree;—and the Burker now knew it was the hideous frolicking of a snake amidst that foliage!

He started up to his feet: he endeavoured to move—but overpowering horror riveted him to the spot. His lower limbs seemed turned into stone: they were as heavy as lead—just as they often appear to the dreamer in the midst of a terrific nightmare. Colder and more clammy still stood the perspiration upon him: he was literally bathed in his own agony.

All of a sudden something darted forth from the canopy of verdure: it was the terrible boa constrictor flinging its immense supple length out from amongst the interlacing branches and masses of foliage that had just proved the scene of its fearful gambollings. It was seen by the Burker but for a moment:—it disappeared amongst the underwood; and then there was a rushing noise towards the spot where he stood like an effigy of marble, but with all the keenest sensibility of a man. Yet for not more than another instant did he stand thus as if petrified;—down he fell, as if terror itself had become suddenly personified in some huge giant-shape, and with an invisible foot crushed him to the earth. The wretch writhed upon the soil as if already encircled by the folds of the monstrous snake of which he had caught a glimpse as it flung itself from amidst the trees. Indeed so strong was his imagination that his contortions and convulsions were as agonising and his throes as horrible as if the serpent had verily and positively got him in its folds. Though all this endured but for a few instants, it was a perfect century of excruciations; and yet no cry escaped his lips—the power of utterance was paralysed—and his agony was perhaps all the greater because he could not give vent to it in one long, loud, pealing cry.

But it was merely in imagination that he was thus suffering. On came the hideous rush that made his blood curdle within him and a glacial chill sweep down his very backbone. But the rush swept past him at a little distance—still amidst the underwood; and then there was a heavy splash in some water that had remained concealed from his eyes. He sprang up to his feet: he rushed away from the spot: but on a little eminence he for a moment reverted his gaze as if by an irresistible fascination. Thence he caught a glimpse of the pool into which the monstrous reptile had plunged; and he beheld its whole length darting through the water, just underneath the surface, and with its head above it. Away sped the Burker:—for a long time he ran, experiencing the awful horror which the spectacle had left upon his mind, as well as the dread that the reptile would yet pursue him and make him its prey.

When thoroughly exhausted—and now with a burning perspiration upon him—he threw himself upon some grass. A loud hissing immediately fell upon his ear; he sprang up as if galvanised; and he caught a glimpse of a cobra gliding away at a little distance. Away he started again; the wretch's brain was almost turned with indescribable horror. At length he beheld what appeared like a rocky elevation, not more than thirty feet high at its greatest altitude; and thither he bent his steps. It proved to be what it appeared; and the Burker found that it contained a cave, without any herbage in its immediate vicinity; so that he walked with a mind relieved from the dread of having his ankle suddenly encircled by some venomous reptile. Yet he was cautious in entering the cave, for fear lest it should be the lair of a wild beast.

It did not penetrate far into the rock; and thus the Burker was soon satisfied that no brute enemy was to be encountered there. There was a sort of loophole fashioned on one side of the cave to admit the light to its innermost depth; and to his mingled joy and surprise he found a mass of cold boiled rice and some fruits placed in a niche underneath the loophole. It naturally struck him that chance had brought him to the habitation of some anchorite-dweller in that jungle; and he sat down in the cave to await the return of its supposed proprietor. But an hour passed—and no one made his appearance. Then the Burker, feeling the pressure of hunger, began to make free with the provisions—to which indeed he was truly welcome; for according to a custom prevalent in India, they had been left by some benevolent Gossoon, or wandering Dervish, for the benefit of the next wayfarer through that wild uninhabited region. But this fact the Burker did not know, and could not then surmise; and thus hour after hour did he wait in the hope of seeing a human form make its appearance; for he craved any companionship in the awful solitude of that jungle.

No one however came; and night was now approaching. There was an ample supply of food for the morrow; for the Burker had eaten sparingly, for fear of giving offence to the supposed anchorite owner of the cavern. The cave was cool during the daytime, in comparison with the intense sultriness that prevailed where he was exposed to the rays of the burning sun; and it seemed to afford a secure resting-place for the night. But haunted by the dread of reptiles and wild beasts, the Burker looked about for the means of rendering it as safe as possible. He blocked up the loophole with stones and fragments of rock; and carrying other fragments into the cave, he formed a barricade sufficiently high at the entrance to protect himself against the intrusion of the enemies he so much dreaded. Then he stretched himself upon the ground to sleep; and thoroughly exhausted, he soon fell into slumber. But his repose was rendered uneasy and agitated by terrific dreams, in which the adventures with the huge boa-constrictor and the hissing cobra were enacted all over again.

He awoke in the morning, but little refreshed by his slumber—shuddering with the recollections of the dreams that had haunted him—and scarcely able to persuade himself for a considerable time that he was not exposed to some imminent peril of a fearful nature. When his mind was somewhat collected, he removed the barricade from the mouth of the cavern: he walked forth—and he looked around him in the hope of discerning the supposed owner of the place where he had found a lodging. But still no human form met his eye; and returning into the cave he refreshed himself with a portion of the provisions. The fruits cooled his parched tongue; and as he ate, he still marvelled why the supposed owner of the cave should remain absent. At length he began to fancy that he might possibly have died in the jungle, somewhere in the neighbourhood—or that he had become the prey of a wild beast or a reptile. All his horrible apprehensions in respect to those dreaded creatures returned to the Burker's mind; and he ventured not far away from the vicinage of the cave throughout that day. At the back of the rock a spring trickled down; and though unprotected by shade, yet was the water cooler than any which the Burker had tasted elsewhere since his entrance into the jungle. When night came, he barricaded the entrance to the cave again—and he slept: but his slumber was once more haunted by horrible dreams, in which tigers, snakes, and venomous reptiles played a conspicuous part.

When morning returned, the Burker made an end of the provisions which he had found in the cave; and he perceived the necessity of seeking somewhere for a fresh supply, as no living being made his appearance, and he was more than ever convinced that the anchorite-owner of that dwelling must have perished in the jungle. He now wandered farther away from the cavern than on the preceding day he had ventured to do: and he endeavoured to find the route to that village which has been before alluded to. He strove to recollect any particular landmarks that might guide him in his search: but herein he totally failed; and he was floundering farther and farther into the jungle instead of drawing nearer to the accomplishment of his aim. He had however been careful to note the landmarks which might guide him back to the hospitable cavern; and towards evening he began to retrace his way thither, half famished and with something very much like a prospect of starvation before him.

He had to pass an assemblage of trees, constituting a dense grove, and occupying about a couple of acres of ground. As he drew near this grove, the Burker fancied that he heard the sounds of human voices. He stopped and listened. Yes—assuredly his conjecture was right! But who might the individuals be? In a country where the members of the brute creation were of so formidable, fearful, and hideous a nature, some of the human species itself might be dangerous to fall in with. So thought the Burker; and he therefore resolved to proceed with caution before presenting himself to these travellers, whoever they might be. The irregularities of the grove—the trees of which stretched out at one point and retreated inwards at another—favoured his stealthy design: so that the Burker was enabled to find a hiding-place, whence he himself might *reconnoitre* without being seen.

He now beheld two natives, seated upon a spot where only the short grass grew; and the smouldering embers of a fire showed that they had recently been cooking the provisions which they were now eating. These consisted of rice and vegetables: but ever and anon one of the Hindoos took a sort of gourd, which was slung by a leathern belt over his shoulder, and having applied it to his own lips, he passed it to his companion. The latter, instead of a gourd, had a sort of knapsack slung over his own shoulder; and both were men between thirty and forty years of age, attired in a manner that showed they belonged to a humble class. Each however had pistols in his belt; and each a musket, or rifle, lying by his side. They had no horses:—they were evidently travelling upon foot; and they had curiously contrived leathern leggings reaching nearly up to the middle of their thighs—no doubt to protect their lower limbs from the fangs of venomous reptiles while making their way through the jungle. They seemed happy and contented enough, as if reposing in that shade with a perfect sense of security; so that the Burker wondered how they could feel themselves thus safe against the sudden attack of a boa constrictor from a tree, however great their reliance might be on their fire-arms in case of the appearance of a wild beast.

The Burker, encouraged by their evident good-humour, was about to issue forth from his place of concealment and accost the two natives—to whom he intended by signs to make known that he was hungry—when a spectacle which he beheld, retained him still in his hiding-place. It must be understood that this hiding-place was amongst a number of trees jutting forth as it were from the side of the grove itself, and therefore half enclosing the open space where the two natives were reposing and feasting. They themselves were lying in such a way that their backs were towards the grove and their sides towards the Burker. It was just at the very moment when the Burker was about to issue forth and reveal himself, that he beheld some dark object, just within the trees and thick underwood behind the two natives. The next instant the branch of a tree was put aside; and the dark countenance of a man peered forth upon the two travellers. This movement was evidently executed in so stealthy and noiseless a manner that the travellers themselves remained unsuspicious of it: for no doubt if they had heard even so much as the rustling of a leaf, they would have grasped their rifles and started up to their feet. The Burker knew not what it meant: but a vague terror seized upon him—for he fancied that some mischief was intended; and he remained motionless as a statue in his hiding-place. But his eyes were riveted upon the spot where that dark countenance had appeared. Again the branch was put aside in the same noiseless manner as before; and now the Burker beheld two swarthy countenances looking down upon the travellers. He was near enough to observe the sinister glare of the eyes belonging to those two countenances; and a still deeper terror was stricken into his own heart.

If all this had occurred in his own native land, the Burker would have doubtless taken some deci-

sive part: but here, in this horrible jungle, it was quite different. Indeed, his mind was attenuated by the sense of continuous perils which surrounded him—by the objects he had seen—and by his horrible dreams at night: he was in a strange land, where everything was different from what he had been accustomed to in England; and thus was it that the Burker in an Indian jungle was himself a different being from the Burker in his own country.

There he was, motionless in his hiding-place,—his mind full of a dismayed suspense: there were the two travellers, reclining on the grass, unsuspicious of impending evil; and there, in the dense maze of verdure behind them, were the two sinister countenances, with eyes glaring as if upon intended victims. All of a sudden two objects were thrown forth—precisely at the same instant—from amidst those trees; and the next moment the two unfortunate travellers were writhing, convulsing, and seeming by their desperate movements to be battling for their very lives. The Burker comprehended it all! Cords, with nooses at the ends, had been thrown forth from amidst the shade of the trees. With such unerring skilfulness and terrible precision were these lassos used that the nooses had fallen round the necks of the two travellers; while the murderers amongst the trees were drawing the cords tight, so that the wretched victims were already in the agonies of death.

Accustomed though the Burker was to deeds of crime, not only in respect to their contemplation, but also their perpetration, he was nevertheless astounded, horrified, and appalled at this spectacle. Even if he had wished to move, he had not the power: his limbs were paralysed—his blood had all curdled in his veins. He could no longer see the murderers within the grove: but he had a frightful view of their victims, who were writhing in the agonies of death and vainly grasping at the cords which were tight round their throats. At length their mortal sufferings were put an end to; and there they lay, still and dead—those who had so lately been in the enjoyment of vigorous life, exchanging convivial words, and with smiles upon their lips! The Burker felt as if a noose were round his own neck; and he dared scarcely even breathe, for fear lest he should betray his presence there and become the third victim!

The two assassins now emerged from their ambush. They were tall, athletic, well-made individuals—nearly naked—each with but a scanty garment of dark cloth fastened round the middle of the body. Their eyes had a ferocious glare, like those of wild beasts; and when they grinned at each other, with fierce bloodthirsty satisfaction at the contemplation of the work they had performed, the Burker perceived that their teeth had been filed into points, so that they resembled those of a shark, or the sharp jagged edge of a saw. Altogether there was something unnatural and fiend-like in the appearance of those miscreants: for though they had the human shape, it was scarcely possible to fancy that they were veritable human beings. The Burker trembled for his life: his breath was held with horrible suspense: his blood seemed to turn into ice in his veins.

Most of our readers will have comprehended that the two assassins belonged to the horrible sect of Thugs, or Stranglers, which has not altogether disappeared from the peninsula of Hindostan. The Burker did not however know who they were; nor had he the slightest idea that their murderous pursuits constituted a sort of diabolic creed as well as a regular avocation. He took them to be mere banditti, who on this occasion had availed themselves of the readiest means of taking the lives of their victims whom they did not dare provoke to an open combat on account of the fire-arms they possessed.

The Stranglers—having gratified their horrible propensity for murderous deeds by gazing for a few minutes upon their victims—proceeded to take possession of their weapons; and then unfastening the cords from around the necks of the murdered men, the Thugs plunged again into the recesses of the grove. They did not tarry to rifle the persons of their victims: they did not even so much as open the knapsack which was slung over the shoulder of one of them: nor did they touch the liquor which the gourd contained, nor the remainder of the food which had been left upon the grass. They vanished from the Burker's view, bearing with them their fatal lassos, and all the weapons that had belonged to the victims of this hideous assassination.

For nearly half-an-hour, however, did the Burker remain in his hiding-place after the departure of the Stranglers. He was afraid to move. He now thought much less of snakes, reptiles, and tigers, than of those horrible miscreants whose victims lay stretched motionless before his eyes. At length the Burker began to take courage somewhat; and thinking that the coast must now be completely clear, he stole forth from his hiding-place. It was still however with fear and trembling that he approached the corpses: for by so doing he approached likewise that very part of the grove where the lassos had been thrown forth. The murderers might still be there; and one of those fatal cords might be thrown out for its deadly noose to encircle his own neck as he had seen both circle the necks of the dead towards whom he was now cautiously and timidly advancing! But all was still; and the Burker, gaining more and more courage, proceeded to possess himself of the gourd, the knapsack, and the remnant of provisions. He longed to tarry and rifle the persons of the dead; for if he found money upon them it might be serviceable to him if ever he should succeed in getting out of that jungle: but a sudden rustling amongst the trees made him flee away for his very life. He was at a considerable distance before he dared to look back; and then he beheld not the forms of the miscreants whom he so much dreaded that his eyes would encounter.

He succeeded in gaining his cavern: but there was another source of surprise and mystification for him. A fire had evidently been lighted in front of the cave during the day; another mass of boiled rice and a quantity of fruits were left in the niche underneath the loophole. But no human being was to be seen on that spot except the Burker himself. The man was seized with a sort of vague and awful terror, as if with the sense that he was the object of some design on the part of preternatural powers. Perhaps the Enemy of Mankind himself was placing that food in his way, more effectually to seal his doom than his own antecedent crimes could have done? But this was an impression that could not be permanently made on such a mind as the Burker's; and he began to have an inkling of the real truth. Doubtless that cavern served as a temporary halting-place for wayfarers through the dreadful jungle?—and doubtless likewise the food was left by some well-provided person for the use of any less fortunate individual who might be compelled to trust entirely to such thoughtful charity? These were the ideas that now arose in the Burker's mind; and the reader is already aware how consistent they happened to be with the actual truth.

He was now well supplied with provisions for the next two or three days; and he found that the gourd contained some exceedingly potent spirit. He ate and drank heartily; but his soul was the prey to a continuous trouble—for he dreaded lest chance or previous knowledge should bring the shark-teethed murderers to his cave. On examining the knapsack, he found that it contained a quantity of despatches, written in a manner which he could not possibly comprehend; and he therefore concluded that the victims of the Stranglers must have been messengers bearing some documents from one Indian authority to another.

When the darkness set in, the Burker barricaded the place with even greater precautions than those he had previously adopted. He slept but little that night; and when slumber did fall upon his eyes, it was more than ever feverish and uneasy; for not merely were his dreams now haunted by wild beasts and reptiles, but likewise by the images of human beings as terrible as the tiger and as stealthy as the serpent.

CHAPTER CLV.

THE TIGER.

On awaking in the morning, the Burker seriously reflected upon his position; and he came to the fixed resolve of escaping out of that jungle, or perishing in the attempt. Being thus determined to abandon the hospitable cave, the Burker filled the knapsack with the remnant of his provisions and slung it over his shoulders. He likewise took with him the gourd; for it still contained no inconsiderable quantity of spirits, which being of a very potent character, produced much effect with even the smallest dram.

It cost the Burker some regret to leave the cavern that had sheltered him; for he felt like a man who was leaving a harbour of comparative safety to enter upon the terrific perils of unknown seas. Perhaps, indeed, the miscreant would have remained altogether in that place, trusting to the benevolence of wayfarers to continue their supplies of provision; but after the tragedy which he had beholden in the jungle, he could not linger in a neighbourhood which appeared to be infested with human monsters as formidable as those which belonged to the brute creation. The Burker accordingly set out, with his gourd and his knapsack, to enter upon the stupendous task of finding an issue from the jungle. Let the reader conceive how great would have been the danger and the consternation of those mariners of the olden time who were the first to penetrate into the awful watery solitudes of the South Pacific, if their compass had been lost. But almost equally hopeless was the task now entered upon by this man—exposed to a thousand perils—without fire-arms or weapons of any kind to protect himself against the wild animals that swarmed in the solitudes of that jungle—ignorant of the way he ought to pursue—and going forth to trust entirely to hazard and to accident to guide him out of this dread inhospitable region.

Not far had the Burker proceeded, when at a distance of about a hundred yards ahead he perceived a tall object, which he had at first taken for a tree, or shrub, suddenly put itself in motion. What at the outset he had fancied to be the branches, all in an instant expanded and seemed to be flapping violently. The idea that it could be a bird flashed through the Burker's mind: but a bird of at least seven feet in height appeared to him an impossibility. Yet a second thought made him reflect that a country which could produce snakes so monstrous as those which he had seen, might contain amongst its zoological wonders birds as colossal as the object which he now beheld at a little distance. He stood still, less terrified perhaps than he had been at the sight of other living things the very names of which made the blood run cold and the flesh creep upon the bones: but still he was far from feeling comfortable.

It was indeed a bird which the man was contemplating; and it was now walking slowly away from the spot where he first saw it. We may as well inform the reader that it was one of the adjutant species, which often attains the height of five feet, and sometimes grows to the proportions of this specimen which the Burker was now surveying. Slowly it proceeded, until appearing suddenly to catch sight of a form to which the eye was unaccustomed, it advanced towards the Burker. Now the man was seized with a complete terror: he turned and fled. But the giant adjutant bird was speedily in his close vicinage; and, apprehending a sudden attack, he snatched up a large stone against which his foot kicked. Fortunate for him was it that he stepped back at the same moment with the speed of lightning: for from the very spot whence he had picked up the stone, a cobra di capello darted forth, raising its hideous hooded head, hissing, and preparing to spring at him. In another moment the adjutant bird seized the cobra in its bill; and the Burker availed himself of the circumstance to place a still greater interval between himself and that colossal specimen of the feathered tribe. He looked back:—the reptile had disappeared from the bill of the bird; and the bird itself was slowly walking away in a contrary direction to that which the Burker was pursuing.

Relieved from that source of apprehension, the wanderer continued his path—if path it could be called where beaten road there was none, and where he advanced amidst thick underwood or rank grass—or else over patches of sward where the herbage was short and sweet, constituting the few oases of wholesome vegetation in that wilderness. For a couple of hours the Burker proceeded without experiencing any fresh peril or alarm—until all of a sudden he was startled by a terrific crashing amongst a neighbouring thicket; and thence emerged a huge animal, which by the trunk and the long ivory tusks he knew to be an elephant. The brute seemed to be either in a naturally wild or else frightened state: for on emerging from the brake, it stood snorting, elevating its trunk, and pawing, or rather trampling the ground with its feet. The Burker stood transfixed with terror for a few moments: he was then about to turn and fly, when there was a sudden rush from the same thicket—and another animal made its appearance. The next moment the elephant and this new-comer closed as it were in combat; and still was the Burker transfixed, gazing upon the awful scene.

The brute with which the elephant was thus engaged, was of considerably less dimensions; and it had a long curving tusk, or horn, on the upper part of its snout. The wanderer in the jungle knew not what it was: but the reader has by this time comprehended that it was a rhinoceros—the deadly foe of the elephant. Each seemed to be fully aware of the mode of attack that would be adopted by the other. The elephant rushed at the rhinoceros to pierce it with its long tusks: but the rhinoceros, though apparently so unwieldy, wheeled about, escaped the meditated blow, and then rushed in with the intention of ripping its opponent's belly with its own tusk. Then the elephant itself displayed a similar agility; and with a sudden movement received the blow upon its haunch, where its impenetrable skin was an effective armour of resistance. Then front to front they were again:—this time the elephant's sharp-pointed tusks pierced the side of the rhinoceros, near the shoulder; and the next moment the horn of the wounded brute was driven up with all the force of the impulsive head into the belly of the elephant. Down fell the huge animal, a strange and terrific sound denoting its mortal agony; while the victorious rhinoceros, drawing back for an instant, rushed forward and inflicted another hideous ripping wound.

The Burker meanwhile had been gazing with indescribable feelings of mingled awe and horror: but he now tarried to behold no more; for he dreaded lest the conquering brute should seek him as another victim. He plunged farther and farther into the jungle—his brain dizzy with the idea of all the horrors that surrounded him, and lost in an appalling wonderment as to what new spectacle might suddenly burst upon his view. He drew near a forest which stretched far as the eye could reach upon his right hand; and if he had been skilled in the vegetable history of Hindostan, he would have known that it was an immense assemblage of those superb teak-trees which rival the British oak in the building of ships. Avoiding the forest as much as possible, on account of the double perils of boa constrictors and Stranglers, the Burker turned away to the left; and another hour's journey brought him to a new scene of verdure. Here towering palm-trees were laden with their fruit—that fruit which he could not reach: but he beheld countless monkeys running up the stems and playing amongst the branches. Mangoes were there growing in wild abundance: but the Burker dared not eat of them, for he was afraid of being poisoned. Pepper-vines and cardamom-plants were richly interspersed around: the plantain and the jack were likewise flourishing there.

The beams of the vertical sun were now fraught with so intense a sultriness that the Burker would have given worlds to be enabled to seek some grateful shade: but for the reasons above set forth, he dared not. He was athirst; for since he had left his cavern he had found no pool nor stream with whose waters he might moisten his feverish lips. He dragged himself painfully along: but in another half-hour he reached a broad stream. Here he sat down to slake his thirst and bathe his feet: but scarcely had he taken off his shoes, when a long terrific head was thrust up above the surface of the water at a little distance; and the gaping jaws showed frightful ranges of teeth. With a cry—a perfect yell of agony, which resounded through those wilds—the Burker started up to his feet, snatched up his shoes, and darted away. On glancing back, he beheld a tremendous alligator emerge from the river; and more quickly sped the affrighted wretch, his mind suffering excruciations as terrific as if he were actually in the jaws of the stupendous reptile. But when he again looked round, he perceived that he was safe from pursuit; and he sank exhausted and in despair upon some masses of granite rock. Tears coursed their way down the face of the unhappy man. He who had never known what compunction was when about to perpetrate a crime—he who had even done murder's work without remorse—now wept at the fearful position in which he found himself. Whichever way he turned, spectacles of horror or of danger—indeed, of both combined—presented themselves. The grass under his feet—the trees above his head—the brakes on one hand—the thickets on the other—the very streams with whose waters he sought to slake his thirst, were all teeming with living beings threatening him with a horrible death. Little had the miscreant ever thought of a future state or of punishments in a world to come: but now it seemed to him as if there were veritably a hell upon earth, affording a frightful foretaste of the one that was to be experienced hereafter!

The Burker put on his shoes; and wiping away the tears which had flowed down his cheeks, he applied himself to the contents of the gourd in order to acquire the reckless courage of desperation. He now looked about him to ascertain the nature of the spot where he had sunk down exhausted. We have already said that he had thrown himself upon some granite blocks; and a closer inspection showed him that they belonged to the ruins of an edifice. These ruins occupied about a quarter of an acre; and the wanderer walked slowly around them. Whatever the edifice might have been, it had almost completely yielded to the effects of time or else to some convulsion of nature; for it had fallen into a destruction that well nigh rendered it a heap of shapeless, meaningless ruins. But presently the Burker discovered the remnant of a gateway, the upright pillars of which still remained. He looked in; and the burning beams of the vertical sun fell fully upon a figure of hideous appearance and colossal dimensions, which appeared to be seated upon an elevation such as a throne or an altar. Despite the potent alchohol which he had imbibed from the gourd, the wanderer's mind was still so attenuated as to be keenly susceptible of the most startling impressions; and his first idea was that a country which teemed with such monsters of the brute creation, might likewise possess human beings of a giant shape. But it was only an effigy of black marble on which the Burker was gazing—a Hindoo deity that had survived, so to speak, the ruin of the temple which enshrined it. The Burker soon saw that it was only an image: he gathered courage—and he penetrated a little way farther, taking a position where the overhanging masses of a once shapely masonry protected him from the beams of the sun. There he sat down; and opening his knapsack, partook of his provisions. Another application to the gourd strengthened his mind in the sense of a reckless desperation: and presently sleep stole upon his eyes.

For about a couple of hours the wearied wanderer thus slept; and as he slowly awoke, it was to encounter the aspect of the colossal effigy of black marble. For a few moments he gazed with an appalled consternation: for during the interval of slumber he had forgotten where he was and what object he had last seen. By degrees however the recollection came back to his mind; and it was also by degrees that he grew aware of some life-like motion on the surface of the black marble effigy. He looked with increasing horror in his gaze and in his mind; and his hair stood on end as he gradually comprehended the hideous truth. Numerous snakes, of small dimensions, were creeping over the Hindoo deity,—some twining around its brow—others dragging their slimy folds over its face—some twisting around its arms—some winding about its legs—others hissing as they trailed their lengths upon its body. The Burker discerned likewise that these reptiles were hooded like the cobra, though they were of a different colour. They were indeed the manilla snakes—

endowed with a venom as deadly as the cobras themselves; but instead of lurking in the grass, they delighted in infesting old buildings and dragging their slimy coils over granite or marble. There was something appallingly horrible in the spectacle of those serpents thus playing about the motionless image; and the Burker, so soon as he could in any way recover from the consternation into which the sight had thrown him, rushed forth from amidst the ruins of that temple. His ears as he thus beat a precipitate retreat were saluted with such a commingling of horrible hissings, that he fancied the whole reptile population of the temple must be swarming out in pursuit of him: so that again did his blood curdle in his veins—again did an ice-chill appear to smite his heart—and again did the very flesh creep upon his bones.

Bitterly did he now repent having left his cavern. Better — far better were it for him to have remained there, even though it were to encounter the peril of the Stranglers' deadly noose, than to wander thus forth amidst scenes where if he only lay down to rest, it was in the midst of a swarm of venomous reptiles. No thought had the wretch of thanking heaven for having preserved him from the hideous danger which for two hours he had unconsciously incurred: but he gave vent to terrific imprecations against his folly for having quitted the cave. To return thither was impossible: he had not studied to preserve the recollection of any landmarks to guide him back to it; and he could no more from memory retrace his way than he could spontaneously discover an issue from the jungle.

Yet where was he to sleep at night? Not upon the grass — not under a tree — not up in the branches of a tree itself—not by the side of a river—not amidst any ruins on which he might stumble! There was death everywhere in that frightful place!—death looked out upon him from every thicket—from every tree—from every brake—from every stone. Surely, surely it was hell upon earth? To die by his own hand? Yes!—but how? He had no weapon. Ah! strangulation? He might suspend himself to a tree? No!—for he dared not even approach a tree for that purpose. The wretch must live: he felt that he must live on until he should become a prey to the tiger, the snake, or the venomous serpent!

He pursued his way, dragging himself slowly along—his only hope being that the jungle must have an end somewhere or another, and that possibly—yes, by the *barest* possibility—he might escape the myriad perils of that wilderness and find himself safe at last. Oh, what a faint hope!—and yet it was the only one to which the wretch could possibly cling. He endeavoured to sustain himself therewith as he pursued his way: but his progress was exceedingly slow; for even when evening approached, the heat continued to be most oppressive.

The sun was setting when the Burker reached a large barren space of two or three acres in extent, and which presented the singular aspect of a perfect desert in the midst of all the surrounding wild, rank, and luxuriant verdure. How this utter desolation on that spot could possibly be, the man suspected not: but it no doubt arose from some volcanic action, which geologists could satisfactorily explain. Here the Burker resolved to lie down and rest himself for the night: for though he could scarcely deem himself secure from roaming wild beasts, yet he at least fancied he was safe against the insidious attacks of reptiles;—and surrounded by so many frightful perils as he was, it naturally appeared a consolation to have even a portion of them for the time mitigated or set at rest.

The dusk closed in around him—or rather, we should say, as much of dusk as there was in that clime and at that season of the year; and the Burker slept. How long he had slumbered he knew not: but he was awakened by the most frightful din. The whole jungle seemed alive with horrible noises,—the howls, the cries, and the yells of wild beasts all mingling in one appalling and stupendous chorus. The wretched man started up with his hair standing on end, his frame quivering violently, and his heart palpitating with such force that it seemed as if it must burst. He listened in awful consternation: he could catch the sounds of objects rushing amongst the underwood and the long rank grass which bounded the desert place that he had chosen for his home during the night. It seemed as if death in some frightful shape must every minute overtake him; and imagination can conceive nothing more horrible than the din by which he was environed. For all the living things in that jungle to be thus disporting, gambolling, quarrelling, or fighting, was something more than the human brain could endure. He felt as if he were going mad: a terrible bewilderment seized upon him—he rushed hither and thither—until at length he sank down completely exhausted, and his senses abandoned him.

When he came back to consciousness, the sun was rising above the distant trees: the jungle was all completely quiet once more. The heat soon became so intense that it appeared to extinguish every trace of life, save that of the Burker's only. But even the smallest insects which had swarmed during the night, had now vanished; and the atmosphere seemed dead with its heavy, immoveable, torrid oppressiveness. The Burker shuddered with horror as he thought of the terrific din which had startled him up in the middle of the night; and he wondered that he had not fallen a victim to the wild beasts which had raged or frolicked during the hours of the sun's absence. To pass such another night as that, in the midst of the jungle, seemed an absolute impossibility; and the Burker asked himself in literal anguish of mind whether it were possible to find an issue from the wilderness during the many long hours of daytime that were now before him? He partook of his food; he drank of the contents of the gourd; and he resumed his way.

The desert spot was left behind: he was once again floundering through the jungle. In about an hour he reached a forest, composed entirely of bamboos growing to a considerable height. Nothing could surpass the picturesque magnificence of that scene: but the Burker scarcely comprehended it:—heaven knows he was in no humour to contemplate whatsoever beauties nature might present to the view in the midst of that wilderness. Taking care not to approach too near to the trees of that forest, he pursued his way amidst the long grass,—until all in a moment he was startled by a savage growl; and looking around with an agonising sense of horror, he beheld an immense tiger at a little distance. There was a tree near. Forgotten all in a moment was the possibility that a boa constrictor might be coiled amongst its branches; and for his life did the Burker rush to that tree. If in cool deliberate moments he had attempted to climb up the trunk, his progress would have doubtless been laboured and slow: but now it was with the veritable agility of a monkey that with arms and legs deftly moving, the aim was accomplished. The tiger bounded to the foot of the tree just as the Burker succeeded in grasping the lowest branches; and the animal gave another terrific howl as it found that its intended victim had escaped. High up towards the Burker the tiger leaped: the frightened man drew himself as it were into the narrowest possible compass: at the same moment there was a rustling amongst the leaves of the branches projecting from the opposite side of the tree—and down was flung the hideous length of an immense snake, its coils being wound about the tiger's body with lightning rapidity.

So horrified was the Burker at this spectacle, that his hands relaxed their hold upon the branches; and he nearly fell,—when he clutched them convulsively again. As a man looks down with consternation and with a cold creeping feeling of the flesh into the depth of a tremendous gulf—so looked down the Burker from amidst the foliage of the tree, at the scene that was taking place below. The coils of the immense snake had been flung around the tiger just at the very moment it was springing upward in the hope of reaching the Burker; and thus the reptile's deadly folds had circled the fore-legs of the animal, pinioning them as it were to its neck. The tiger fell down; and by means of his hind legs, as well as with the convulsing litheness and elasticity of its body, it plunged, and writhed, and made the most desperate efforts to escape from its fearful enemy. But all in vain! The boa constrictor had its tail coiled tight round the branch from which it had thrown itself; and not more securely is a ship kept at anchor by its cable, than that tiger was held fast by the supple length of the snake.

At first terrific howls and cries of anguish burst from the tiger's mouth: but these soon ceased; for the constricting folds circled its neck as well as all the fore-part of its body; and those folds were tightened with all their terrific power, until the captured brute was compelled to desist from its howlings by the sense of strangulation. The snake seemed to have done enough for the present: or else, with a hideous malignity, it purposed to play with its victim ere completely despatching it: or else perhaps, conscious how completely the tiger lay in its power, it wished to ascertain to what extent the brute's efforts might go to release itself from the binding coils. At all events the snake remained quiet, when the tiger, exhausted by its ineffectual endeavours to escape from the folds, lay motionless as if dead.

The Burker had desperately clutched the branches in order to retain himself in the tree; and looking down, he observed all that we have been describing. He could see the head of the reptile lying flat upon the tiger's back, close by the side of its own last slimy fold; and the eyes—small—shining like diamonds, but with a dread sinister light—seemed to be looking up at the man in the tree. Cold and horrible was the shudder which swept through the Burker's form, as he wondered within himself why the snake had not attacked him in preference to the tiger? He knew not that the instinct of the reptile taught it to prefer that which was its natural and known enemy, rather than assail a form which it was but little accustomed to behold in the jungle,—a human form the like of which perhaps the reptile had never seen before. Indeed, if the Burker had been better instructed in the habits of that species of snake, he would have known that he might now in all safety descend from the tree and continue his way: for that the reptile and the tiger would never separate until one should have become the victim of the other. But all this the Burker knew not; and consequently he dared not think of effecting his escape. Indeed, he fancied that if he were to descend from the tree, the serpent might suddenly loosen its hold upon the tiger to fling its deadly coils around himself—and that thus he should become exposed to the attack of both the snake and the wild beast.

But to be doomed to remain in that tree, and witness the spectacle that was passing underneath, was an idea so horrible that the man's brain reeled—a species of vertigo seized upon him—and again was he about to fall from the tree, when he was startled by a sudden howl of mingled rage and anguish that burst from the mouth of the tiger. Oh, with what tenacity did the Burker again clutch the branches of that tree!—how fearful was the shuddering that swept through his entire frame!—how excruciating was the sense of his hideous position!

It was but one howl which the tiger thus sent forth at that moment: for the coils which the snake had probably loosened in malignant sport for an instant, were suddenly drawn tight again. The brute was half strangled once more: but it made the mightiest and most desperate efforts to release itself from the deadly coils. It lashed the grass and ground with its tail—and therewith likewise it dealt terrific blows at the snake itself. It tried to tear the reptile with its hinder claws: it convulsed—it writhed—it rolled itself about: its agony was horrible. Then the snake tightened its coils, just sufficiently to overpower its victim without actually extinguishing its life; and there was another dread interval of silence. Tight round the branch of a tree remained the tail of the snake; its long supple body hung down like an immense rope, gradually becoming thicker and thicker until it attained the dimensions of the Burker's thigh; and then each successive coil became less and less in circumference, to the thin tapering neck on which the comparatively small head was fixed. During this second interval of silence—this period of suspended death-struggles on the part of the tiger—the reptile's eyes again appeared to be looking up towards the Burker with a gleaming, vibrating light. He endeavoured to avert his own gaze; but he found it irresistibly bent down again upon those small dark brown reptile orbs that were twinkling as diamonds.

Again, all of a sudden, was there a desperate effort made by the tiger to release itself. With all the power of its hind legs, and of its form which was well nigh as supple as that of the snake itself, did it strive to drag the reptile down from the tree. The boa constrictor seemed to elongate like a tightened cable when a ship is pulling hard at its moorings: but in a few moments the wondrous elasticity of the serpent was displayed; for, apparently without an effort, it shortened its length, as it were, and drew the tiger completely in towards the root of the tree. Then, the Burker, with hair standing on end, and the flesh creeping coldly, heard the crashing of the bones of the agonising wild beast: for the coils of the snake were giving the last fatal evidence of their constricting power. Slowly advanced the snake's head, farther and farther over the body of the tiger: tighter and tighter became the coils: more continuous, but likewise more and more languid, grew the convulsions and the writhings of the perishing wild beast. At length the tiger lay motionless—but not this time to recover from its exhaustion and gather strength for a new effort to shake off its enemy. The tiger was dead.

Again there was an interval of silence; and the Burker might have fancied that the snake was dead likewise, were it not that its eyes continued to gleam with that horrible reptile light, and that its length between the branch sustaining its tail and the commencement of its coils around the tiger, dangled lazily to and fro, like a partially loosened cable agitated by the wind. But not long was this interval of silence: for soon did the bones again begin to crash; and now all along the supple length of the serpent there were the evidences of the strong muscular motion, the vibrations and the tensions, by which the constricting process was carried on against the last impediments. The tiger lay with its mouth open, its tongue lolling out and dabbled with blood. Its green eyes were fixed in a glassy stare; and the constricting power of the reptile gave a continuous oscillating motion to the form of the wild beast itself. Gradually the snake wound its coils completely about the tiger, which thus kept on elongating in the powerful gripe of each iron fold. The boa proceeded deliberately with the work that it was accomplishing: it had to break the bones in every part of the brute's body; and thus at length its neck encircling the hinder legs, drew them tight up against the belly of the wild beast. Ribs, legs, backbone all were thus successively crushed; so that at the expiration of a time the tiger presented to the view only one long shapeless mass. Ever and anon the snake desisted for awhile, as if to rest—or as if to gloat over its triumph and its intended meal. And all this while the Burker remained in the tree, a spectator of the hideous scene!

Two mortal hours thus passed from the moment when the snake first flung its coils about the form of the tiger, until the point which our description has just reached. Two mortal hours!—they seemed two centuries to the miserable man! Nothing could be more horrible than the sensation produced upon him by the breaking, crashing, and crushing of those bones. He felt as if the snake were coiled around himself, and as if they were his own bones which were thus frightfully yielding to the infernal pressure. Indeed, the world has no language possessing terms strong enough to convey an idea of all the wretch experienced during those two mortal hours. Nothing he had previously known of the horrors of the jungle, could be compared to this crowning one. His compulsory vicinage to that monstrous reptile, measuring at least forty feet in length, was in itself a stupendous horror: but when he heard the bones crash—and ignorant of the precise habits of the snake, trembled lest it should seek *another* victim—he felt as if he were about to yell forth in the wild anguish of a maniac.

But the reptile had other work to do. Gradually loosening its coils from around the tiger, it began to cover the elongated carcase with a slime which its livid jaws poured forth,—its lambent tongue playing the while, and its eyes gleaming in a manner that added fresh details to the unspeakable hideousness of the entire scene. At the same time a most sickly and revolting effluvium began to circle about the Burker, as he sat up in the tree. It grew more and more intense: the whole atmosphere around him seemed poisoned. He thought that the strongest life could not remain proof against that disgusting odour: again did a species of vertigo seize upon him; and again did he clutch the branches with all his power in order to save himself from falling.

Aroused by that effort, more mechanical than voluntary at the time,—he again looked down to behold the doings of the snake. It was preparing to enjoy the fruits of its triumph—to benquet after its own fashion upon its victim—to partake of its horrid meal. The Burker could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses when he perceived that the snake was preparing to swallow the lubricated and elongated carcase of the tiger. The reptile's head was of a smallness and its neck of a narrowness in comparison with the bulk of its body at the thickest part, that it seemed impossible for even an object a quarter as great as the dead wild beast to be swallowed in such a manner. How great therefore was the Burker's amazement—how breathless his horror—how fearful the interest which he experienced, when he perceived the jaws of the snake open to an extent which readily allowed them to suck in as it were the head of the tiger. With its tail still retaining a firm hold of the branch of the tree, as if on this support depended the entire muscular power which the reptile possessed,—it proceeded slowly—and it even appeared, painfully—to suck in the remainder. This appalling process lasted for nearly half-an-hour: then slowly did the boa disengage its tail from the branch; and as much of its length as had remained suspended to the tree, dropped heavily to the ground. The snake now lay completely still: its head was buried somewhere amidst its coils—so that the vibrating eyes were no longer looking up at the Burker. He could perceive where, in the thickest part of its body, the mass of the swallowed tiger lay: for there was a tremendous bulging-out of the reptile's form, defining the complete configuration of that degluted mass.

For nearly four hours had the Burker now remained in the tree; and he began to recollect something he had once heard or read of the torpid state in which reptiles remain for a long while after having partaken of a meal. Still he dared not immediately descend from the tree—though stronger and stronger grew his belief and his hope that the serpent was now powerless to hurt him.

The effluvium continued most poisonous—most sickly: for it mingled with the heavy sultry air, which was itself stagnant and dead; and there was not the slightest breath of a healthful breeze to carry that odour away. Time was passing: the snake lay completely motionless; and at length the Burker ventured to agitate the branches. This experiment strengthened his belief and his hope: for not even so much as the reptile's head was raised from amidst the folds into which the boa had gathered itself at the foot of the tree. There it lay like a hideous shapeless mass—inert—to every appearance deprived of vitality.

Summoning all his courage to his aid, the Burker descended from the tree. A dread convulsing shudder shook him coldly as his feet touched the ground—a shudder produced by the hideous apprehension that the snake might dart at him. But no!—it still lay motionless. Then away he sped—away he sped as if for his very life!—and he breathed not freely, until a considerable distance being completed, he looked back and saw that he was safe from all pursuit. Yet still he rushed on, anxious to place as long an interval as possible betwixt himself and the scene of the horrible spectacle which he had beholden. At length, thoroughly exhausted, he sank upon a sward of short sweet herbage, near the brink of a well, the mouth of which was surrounded by granite blocks to a height sufficient to prevent any one from falling in if walking incautiously in the day-time or journeying that way in the dark.

Yes—the Burker was utterly exhausted, both in mind and body. He wondered how he had possibly survived the tremendous spectacle he had witnessed. It even appeared to him a dream—though it was indeed all a terrific reality. For a while he forgot the cravings of hunger; he thought not even of strengthening himself with the contents of his gourd: it seemed as if he could not sufficiently reason his mind into the conviction that he had actually escaped with his life from the hideous perils which he had so recently encountered. But at length he addressed himself to his provisions; and he was exhilarated with the potent fluid which he imbibed from the friendly gourd.

CHAPTER CLVI.

THE STRANGLER

The Burker was seated upon the grass, partaking of the rice and fruits which his knapsack contained, as well as of the alcoholic beverage from the gourd,—when, in his endeavour to put away from his thoughts the late hideous scene of which he had been a beholder, he began to reflect on the tragedy in which the shark-teethed Stranglers had played so direful a part. He recalled to mind the insidious manner in which they had from the maze of verdure first ascertained the precise position in which their victims were reclining ere they threw out their deadly lassos. The Burker reflected how much it behoved him to be continuously on his guard against such stealthy, creeping, cat-like miscreants; and he began revolving in his mind what he should do if circumstances happened to make him aware that such monsters in human shape were at any time menacing himself with danger. Anxious to divert his thoughts from the more recent incident of horror, he kept them steadfastly fixed on this other topic; and he weighed a dozen different plans of dealing with the Stranglers should he happen to fall in with them. But chiefly he perceived the necessity of keeping entirely on his guard, and not for an instant losing his presence of mind if the emergency should arise.

It was while thus meditating that he beheld something which put all his resolution to the test. We should remark that amongst the various remains of a superior civilisation which formerly characterised that Hindoo population whom British misrule and tyranny have thrown back and degraded, there are numerous tanks and wells in different parts of the Indian Peninsula. These are sometimes to be found in the jungles themselves; for where those jungles now serve as dwelling-places for reptiles and wild beasts, a consummate agriculture once flourished. It was by one of these wells that the Burker had seated himself: and, as we have already stated, the mouth was surrounded by large blocks of stone, forming a circular wall to the height of about two feet and a half. This wall was overgrown with bushes and long grass, constituting as it were a brake or thicket that nearly covered the entrance of the well, whose diameter was upwards of four feet. All in a moment—just as the Burker was looking towards the well, wondering how deep it could be, and whether he could by any possible means obtain some water thence to cool the lips and tongue that were parched by the alcohol as well as by the intense sultriness of the sun—he distinctly caught sight of a human eye gleaming at him betwixt an opening in the stones and through the thicket. A shudder swept over him: but it was imperceptible; and inasmuch as he had only an instant before made up his mind how to act in case of a particular emergency arising, he was not thrown off his guard. Fortunate for him was it that the very subject which now exacted all his self-possession should have so recently occupied his thoughts. In a word, he was fully prepared for that which now occurred.

He did not appear to take any notice of the circumstance itself: but laying himself flat down on the grass, he shaded his eyes with his hand as if to keep off the beams of the sun. He was nevertheless gazing sideways in the direction of the spot where he had seen the human eye: for that it was a man's eye he felt convinced; and equally certain was he that it belonged to one of the murderers of the two travellers, or else to some one who pursued similar avocations. He reflected what course he should pursue. He had the horrible conviction that if he were to rise up and attempt to seek safety in flight, the deadly lasso would in a moment be round his neck. It was to avoid this peril that he had thrown himself flat upon his back. He failed not to remember that the Stranglers had taken possession of the fire-arms of their recent victims: but he thought to himself that if the individual concealed in the well were really one of those Stranglers—if he still retained the fire-arms—and if he had purposed to use such a weapon on the present occasion, he would not have waited all this while; for it was so easy to send a bullet whizzing through the same opening which served as the means for the view taken by that gleaming

eye. It likewise occurred to the Burker that the Stranglers might have no powder and ball to render their fire-arms available; for he did not remember to have seen them take any such ammunition from about the persons of the murdered travellers.

But what was the Burker to do in order to escape from the enemy, or enemies, as the case might be? While lying flat upon the grass, he was safe from the lasso: but this position could not be maintained for ever. He believed a deadly struggle to be inevitable with whomsoever the well contained; for that it was really an enemy, or enemies, he was equally convinced: or else why should such secret ambush be maintained? After all the horrors endured in respect to reptiles and wild beasts, it was positively a relief to the Burker's mind to reflect that he had now to deal with human beings. It was a warfare more after his own fashion; and as the man naturally possessed a dauntless courage, he was not now to be overawed by the vicinity of a human foe. Indeed he had become so reckless of life that he cared not how soon it was lost: at the same time it was a matter of satisfaction to reflect that if it were now to be surrendered it would not be to a snake nor a wild beast;—and he was resolved also to sell that life of his as dearly as possible.

After some few minutes spent in meditation, he bethought himself of a stratagem to draw the enemy from the ambush, and thereby make himself aware of the number whom he might have to encounter, as well as of the nature of the hostile weapons against which he might be called upon to defend himself. He accordingly feigned to be asleep. Gradually he suffered the hand with which he had shaded his eyes, to fall away from his face and drop upon the grass, with the languid uncontrolled movement of one who was veritably slumbering. At the same time he turned himself a little more sideways, as if the beams of the sun caused this motion, even on the part of a sleeper;—and he kept one eye just so slightly open that he could still discern anything that might take place at the mouth of the well.

A few more minutes now elapsed—when the Burker beheld a dark countenance appearing above the thicket; and he recognised it to be that of one of the shark-teethed assassins of the two travellers in another part of the jungle. The Strangler was gazing with his penetrating eyes upon him; and being apparently satisfied that the Burker really slept, he drew himself up more and more above the thicket and the stones. He had on his dark scanty garment, just the same as when the Burker had previously seen him: but he seemed to have no weapons of any kind, except the lasso, which was now tied round his waist.

It was a relief to the Burker's mind thus to ascertain the condition in which the Strangler presented himself. Stealthily he stepped forth from his ambush; and he seemed to be alone; for he tarried not to be followed by any companion: nor did he look down into the well to make any sign or to whisper any word. He now laid himself flat upon the grass, and began noiselessly dragging himself towards the Burker. This the Burker by no means liked: for the idea of a subtle poison at the point of some small sharp instrument, instantaneously flashed through his startled brain. For a few moments longer he remained undecided how to act,—while the Strangler was working his noiseless way nearer and nearer towards him. All in a moment the Burker sprang up: but quick as his own movement was that of the Hindoo; and not more quickly do two wild animals close in the deadly strife than did these two men grapple with each other The Burker was astonished at the degree of strength developed by his opponent,—whose wiry form, with but little flesh upon it, seemed likewise to be endowed with an extraordinary elasticity. The Burker felt that all his own energies were needed; for he read a ferocious desperation in the sinister gleaming eyes of the Strangler. Those two men regarded each other as if the feeling were mutual that the safety of one could only be secured by the death of the other; and thus, after they had grappled together with the lightning-agility already described, they paused for an instant, as if mutually to read each other's purpose in their eyes. Then the struggle commenced.

With a cry that resembled the mingled howl and yell of a wild beast, the Burker endeavoured to hurl his opponent to the ground: but the Hindoo, anticipating the movement, grasped the Burker's neckcloth with such terrific force as almost to strangle him. Then the Burker dealt tremendous blows with his great thick boots at the bare legs of the Strangler; so that the latter, unable to endure the agony, loosened his hold. But not a sound fell from his lips. No accent of either rage or pain escaped him: in total silence did he conduct his hostile proceedings, as if he were dumb.

His hold was loosened but for an instant; and then he closed in such a manner with the Burker that the latter was no longer able to use his legs as weapons of offence, but had quite enough to do to prevent himself from being thrown down. Mustering up all his strength—arming himself as it were with all the energies that he could possibly call to his aid, he made a tremendous effort to bring down his foe. But quick as lightning the Hindoo darted away to a little distance: in the twinkling of an eye the lasso was taken from over the folds of his garment; and its length was flung forth as rapidly as the boa constrictor had ere now thrown itself from the tree upon the tiger.

The Burker was however fully on his guard; and as the noose approached him he caught it in his hand. With a sudden jerk it was torn away; and the Strangler disappeared amidst the bushes and long grass at a little distance. The Burker waited for some minutes with all the keen wariness of one who was not to be taken by surprise: but the Strangler re-appeared not. The man sat down to rest himself, still however keeping his eyes fixed upon the spot where the Hindoo had vanished. Half an hour passed, and no sign was there of the Strangler: no sound indicated his return. The Burker gave vent to a bitter imprecation that the encounter should have finished in such a manner; for he could not help thinking that his enemy would dog him through the jungle in the hope of taking him unawares. Thus the Burker's position acquired a new horror; for he was not only exposed to the ferocious attacks of wild beasts and the more stealthy hostility of reptiles, but he had now to guard against a monster in human shape possessing the fierceness of the former and the subtlety of the latter.

He rose, and continued his way: but like Robinson Crusoe on the island, after having seen the print of a man's foot upon the sand, he kept looking around him, with anxious uneasiness and nervous alarm, in every direction. Thus he toiled on through the jungle until night began to close in; and then, utterly exhausted, he felt the absolute necessity of seeking some place where he might repose. But where was he to find such a spot? Perhaps the Strangler was at no great distance?—perhaps he had been creeping on amidst the bushes and the long grass, heedless of the venomous reptiles that might be lurking there?—peradventure even at that moment he might be within a few yards of the Burker, waiting for an opportunity to throw his lasso with better effect than on the former occasion. The wretched English criminal was goaded almost to desperation; and again did thoughts of suicide enter his head. He now walked feebly and like a drunken man, with the sense that if he were to stop short he must sink down, and probably become a prey to the unseen enemy whom he believed to be dogging his footsteps.

Such was the Burker's state of mind and such his physical condition, when, as the dusk was closing in around him, he beheld a clump of trees which by their configuration he thought he had seen before. Yes—he felt convinced of it! He looked about him—he beheld some other object which was familiar: he was in the neighbourhood of the very cave where he had previously found an asylum, and where unseen hands had afforded him the means of appeasing his hunger. He experienced a feeling of relief, while he marvelled that by a long circuitous route his wanderings should thus have brought him back to a place which he had fancied to have been abandoned for ever.

The cave was soon reached; and the Burker's first thought was to look and see if there were any provisions in the niche under the loophole: but there were none. He set about to fortify the cavern with even greater precautions than he had used on the former occasions; and when his task was accomplished, he partook of the food and liquor which he still possessed, and of which he had a supply sufficient for the morrow. His former experiences at the cave had led him to believe, or at least to hope that it was safe against the intrusion of venomous reptiles: but how far secure it might prove against the designs of his human foe, he knew not. He therefore dreaded the approach of slumber when he felt a drowsiness stealing over him; and in order to shake it off he rose up and walked about the cave, which penetrated to the distance of about six or seven yards under the hill in which it was hollowed. All of a sudden his foot kicked against something soft—apparently a human form. A cry of alarm was on the very point of bursting from the Burker's lips, as he fancied that it might possibly be the Strangler who had got before him to that hiding-place: but he kept back the exclamation at the very instant that it was about to peal forth: for though his foot had come in strong concussion with that object, whatever it were, there was no movement on its part. The Burker stooped down, in the utter darkness which prevailed in the cave; and full of horrified suspense he passed his hand over the object. He encountered garments of some sort; and now his hand came in contact with *another* hand: but its touch was that of death! There was a human corpse in that cave.

The Burker's blood congealed in his veins: he shuddered from head to foot: a glacial horror took possession of him. He had barricaded himself in that cave with a corpse!—his soul revolted in superstitious dread from the unseen body; and yet he dared not dash down his granite barriers and issue forth from that cavern, for fear of becoming a prey to the terrible Strangler who might be lurking outside. But, oh! to pass an entire night—short though an Eastern night be—in that den, along with a dead body,—the idea was intolerable! If he had seen it—if he knew precisely how it looked—if he were aware of the manner in which the person had died—it would be all different: but he was utterly ignorant on these points. He sat himself down in the cave, near the barricade at the entrance, so as to be as remote as possible from the subject of his horror; and then ten thousand hideous ideas began trooping through his mind. He fancied he could hear the corpse move—that it was gliding towards him as noiselessly as the Strangler was creeping to approach him some hours back; and the wretched man thus went on giving way to his terrific imaginings until his hair stood on end, his eyes were staring through the darkness in wildest—almost frenzied horror. No inclination had he for slumber now: no need was there to battle against a sensation of drowsiness; for it stole not over him: he was broad awake;—never was he more completely awake in his whole life!

Thus the hours passed on,—hours that constituted one long mortal agony for that wretched, wretched man. It was not enough to endure the horrors and dangers of the jungle—the perils of wild beasts, of serpents, and of monsters in human form: but even in the cave which he had at least fancied to be a comparatively sure retreat, he found himself a prey to thoughts and feelings which were sufficient to drive him to madness. Not once did the man close his eyes that night: but there he sat, irresistibly abandoning himself to reflections and misgivings which would have made almost any other person suddenly shriek forth as a maniac. At length the glimmering of dawn began to penetrate through the interstices of the barrier he had fixed at the entrance of the cavern: but still the end of the cave remained enveloped in total darkness. Morning advances rapidly in the eastern clime; and the sun soon poured forth its full effulgence. The Burker's mind felt relieved; and he began to remove the barricade from the mouth of the cavern. When this task was accomplished, he advanced towards the dead body, and drew it forward by the feet until the light revealed the entire form completely to the Burker's eyes. It was the body of an old Hindoo, with a long grey beard; and its dress enabled the Burker to comprehend that the man had been one of those Gossoons, or wandering Dervishes, whom he had seen during his journey from Calcutta to Inderabad, when a prisoner in the suite of Queen Indora and her husband. But how came the man by his death?—was it from natural causes? had he in illness dragged himself to that cave to die? or had he, when reposing there, been suddenly smitten by the hand of the destroying angel? The Burker knew not. There were no marks of violence upon the old man's person: but as the Burker examined him more and more closely, he perceived two little spots close together upon the calf of one of the thin emaciated legs. These spots resembled the punctures of a lancet, or of some other small sharp-pointed instrument. They were of a livid hue on the dusky skin of the deceased; and it was only after the closest inspection that they were discernible at all. The Burker did not however fancy that these were in any way connected with the man's death; and he therefore came to the conclusion that he had died from some natural cause.

Issuing forth from the cave, the Burker looked cautiously about,—keeping himself upon his guard against the deadly lasso of the Strangler: but no one was to be seen. He dragged the corpse completely out of the cavern; and he found that in a species of wallet which the dead Gossoon had about his person, there was a quantity of cold boiled rice. The Burker could not afford to let pass such an opportunity of replenishing his own knapsack, even though the provender had been lying for hours in such near contact with a corpse. While he was engaged in transferring the rice to his wallet, he suddenly beheld three persons advancing from a little distance. He started up from his kneeling posture, and rapidly scrutinised them with mingled hope and apprehension. They might prove friendly disposed and help him to escape from the depths of the dreadful jungle: or they might prove as hostile as the Stranglers themselves. He saw that they were three Gossoons; and now he was smitten with the dread that they might fancy he had murdered the individual who lay at his feet.

They advanced rapidly, and at first showed by their looks that they were surprised at finding a European of his appearance in such a spot as that: then their eyes fell upon the corpse that lay upon the ground—and with shouts of mingled rage and horror they rushed towards the Burker. Two of them had huge clubs—the third had a long knife, which he drew from his girdle and brandished menacingly. The Burker made vehement signs to testify his innocence, and likewise to make the Gossoons aware that he had found the corpse in the cavern. They seemed to comprehend him: but two of them held him fast, while the third proceeded to examine the corpse with the minutest scrutiny. We should observe that they were all three men of middle age—strong built, powerful, and looking more like ferocious depredators than the votaries of a religious sect.

All of a sudden the man who was examining the dead body, pointed out the little punctures to the view of his comrades: and they at once let go their hold upon the Burker. They then all three began lamenting after their own rude fashion,—howling, beating their breasts, and making horrible contortions; while the one who possessed the knife, took it and hacked himself in half-a-dozen places until he was covered with his own gushing blood. The other two took the knife in their turns, and did the same to themselves,—while the Burker looked on with horror lest they should expect him to follow their example, or should else offer to perform the disagreeable service for him. But they were evidently paying no attention to him: they seemed fully satisfied that he was *not* the murderer of their brother-gossoon; and thus, as the Burker's confidence revived, he began to reflect on what had taken place. That the Gossoons regarded the punctures as the cause of their friend's death, he felt convinced; and the idea stole into his mind that they were produced by the bite of a snake. If so, then even that cave itself was not proof against the fearful visitations of the stealthy reptiles!—and the man's blood curdled with horror at the idea that he had possibly passed the night in that cavern with the very serpent that had pierced the unfortunate dervish with its envenomed fangs.

The three Gossoons at length made an end of their lamentations; and they addressed the Burker in their own language: but he could not comprehend a syllable they said—neither did they understand him when he spoke to them in his English vernacular. They now intimated by signs that he was to leave them: he joined his hands in entreaty—but they shook their heads sternly, and motioned him to depart. Again he persevered in his endeavour to give them to understand that he besought permission to accompany them: but their signs only grew more peremptory—and the knife was brandished before his eyes:—he was therefore compelled to sling on his knapsack and hasten away.

But as he moved off, the thought occurred to him that the Gossoons might probably only require his temporary absence while they performed some rites or ceremonies in respect to the deceased. He therefore resolved to watch them from a distance, and to approach them again if he beheld a suitable occasion. They however seemed determined that he should leave their vicinity altogether; and they quickly disabused him in respect to his last hope: for the one who was armed with a knife, followed the Burker for a little while; and every time he looked round, the Gossoon kept making impatient signs for him to hasten still farther away.

The wretched man was thus debarred of the chance which for a little while had seemed to favour him, of being guided out of that dreadful jungle. He continued his way; and when the Gossoon was no longer in sight, he sat down by the side of a rock from which a crystal spring gushed forth. With that water he refreshed himself: but he still remained sitting there, pondering most despondingly his forlorn and desolate condition. Every now and then he awoke as it were with a kind of start from his reverie, and flung his anxious looks around, with the dread lest the Strangler were creeping stealthily towards him. He however beheld no one; and after a while he resolved to continue his way once more. He was pursuing his path along a rough uneven ground,—always taking care to avoid the vicinity of trees as much as possible, and likewise to avoid the long grass, when he was suddenly startled by a rustling amongst some shrubs at a little distance; and the next moment he beheld a black animal, considerably larger than a cat, rush forth in pursuit of some smaller prey. It was a panther of diminutive size: but the instant it caught sight of the Burker it bounded towards him. The man turned to fly; for the green eyes of the panther gleamed at him with a terrible fierceness: but all in a moment a strange cry or yell of agony reached his ears; and glancing back, he observed that the panther had been seized upon by a cobra di capello of considerable size—the largest indeed that the Burker had as yet seen since first he set foot upon the soil of India. He remained not however to witness the result of the conflict between the animal and the reptile: but he sped on with all the swiftness that he could command. Without at first perceiving it, he was retracing his way towards the cave: but he did not become aware of the fact until he reached the rock from whose side the crystal spring was gushing forth.

Almost maddened by the sense of this last peril which he had escaped,—once again embracing the hope that by means of piteous entreaty he might induce the Gossoons to guide him out of the jungle—and too reckless of life not to seek their presence once more, even though he should perish by the sharp blade which they had used against their own persons,—the Burker resolved to go back to the cavern. It was now by no means difficult for him to find his way thither: but when he came in sight of the eminence in the bowels of which it was hollowed, he beheld nothing of the Gossoons. Nor as he drew near its entrance did he behold the corpse of the deceased on the spot where he had last seen it. It struck him that the Gossoons had probably buried it, and that they might be reposing themselves in the cave. Assuming an aspect of the most piteous entreaty, he approached the cavern: but he beheld no one within. He however saw a wallet lying upon the ground; and he recognised it as that which had belonged to the deceased, and from which he had taken the rice. Before he touched it he assured himself that no one was in the cavern,—the dead

Gossoon as well as the living ones had disappeared.

Remembering that there were two compartments to the deceased's wallet, and that he had only examined one, he now lifted it up. In the second compartment he found nothing but the means of striking a light. By this discovery he was however gratified: for it enabled him to make a minute investigation of the cave. He was resolved to establish this cavern as his abiding-place, with the hope that some kindly disposed Gossoon would sooner or later pass that way and guide him out of the jungle. He had seen enough to convince him that it was used as a halting-place for wanderers and wayfarers passing through that frightful wilderness; and he likewise fancied that it was the securest spot he could find in respect to wild beasts and reptiles. In that jungle no place was altogether secure; for it was evident that even there a snake had stolen in and bitten the old Gossoon, probably while he was sleeping. Still in a district where every spot was perilous, this certainly appeared to be the least so of any. At all events it was better to remain stationary there than to go floundering about amidst the pathless wilds where every step was taken at the risk of his life.

Having made himself a torch of a resinous branch—holding it in one hand, and with a tolerably stout stick in the other—the Burker entered the cave. It was only at the innermost extremity beyond the loophole, that it was quite dark: but now the torch illuminated it fully. He advanced cautiously, fearful lest at any moment a reptile should spring at him: he examined every crevice and corner; and he was just on the point of turning away with the conviction that the cavern was completely free from any insidious foe of the reptile species, when all of a sudden the light of his torch was reflected in two small gleaming objects at the extremity of the cavern, about a foot from the ground, and just in front of him. They were the eyes of a reptile; and the blood ran cold in his veins. In a few moments the snake glided out from the hole where it was previously lurking: with a frightful hiss it raised itself up, and expanded its hood preparatory to taking the fatal spring—for it was a cobra. That strong shudder on the Burker's part was instantaneously followed by the complete recovery of all his presence of mind; for he was rendered desperate by the sense of danger; and just at the very moment that the reptile was about to dart at him, he struck it a blow with his stick. The aim was well taken: the serpent writhed in agony—but another blow despatched it.

Having thrown the snake forth from the cave, the Burker proceeded to examine it in every part with the closest possible scrutiny: but he discovered not another hole. He thrust his stick into the one whence the reptile had emerged: but there was no reason to imagine that there were any other snakes in the same ambush. He however stopped up the hole; and his examination being over, he bethought himself of a means of protecting the entrance of the cave from the insidious visits of such fearful guests for the future. He remembered that the houses on the outskirts of Inderabad had all gravel laid down at their doors; and as the fellow was not wanting in ingenuity nor keenness, it occurred to him that so invariable a custom must have a specific object:—and what object could it be if not for the very one which he at all events now resolved to adopt as a suggestion? It moreover seemed to him natural enough that the reptile species would not drag their bellies over substances that might cut, graze, or wound them. He therefore began to chip off and break up pieces of the granite blocks which lay strown about; and in this manner he occupied himself for the remainder of the day—taking good care however to be upon his guard against the insidious approach of that human reptile—the Strangler.

Before the dusk began to close in, the Burker had covered a large space of ground in front of the cave with the little fragments of granite; and thus for a distance of about six yards in length and three in width was this defence-work formed. Having reconstructed his barrier, he sat down in the cavern to partake of his food; and his meal being finished, he found slumber stealing upon his eyes. Even before he was completely asleep—and while only cradled in the dreamy repose which precedes total slumber—the image of the Strangler kept rising into his mind; so that every now and then he was startled into complete wakefulness; and then with the cold perspiration upon his brow he listened with suspended breath. Sometimes he almost fancied that he heard some one moving about in the vicinage of the cavern, or that his barricade of stones was being disturbed. Once or twice he imagined that he heard some one breathing quite near him inside the cave; and it was a long time before he could satisfy himself that all this was mere fancy. At length he fell into a profound slumber.

He knew not how long it lasted: but he was wakened up with the horribly oppressing conviction of some imminent peril. Again he listened with suspended breath; and gradually upon his ear came the sound of a stone being removed from the mouth of the cavern. Still he listened,—his blood curdling in his veins. Yes—that sound was continued! Slowly and slowly was one of the granite blocks of his barrier being removed from its setting. By the glimmering light which prevailed outside, he could discern the gradual disappearance of the stone from the uppermost layer. He now knew that an enemy was at work:—and what foe could this be unless the one of whose stealthy proceedings he had already received such proof?

How should he act? Many minutes elapsed before, in the horror of his feelings, he could make up his mind. At length he decided upon the course to be pursued. Taking it for granted it *was* the Strangler, he resolved to allow him to continue his work, and then ascertain in what manner his insidiously hostile demonstration was to be made. Perhaps he intended to form a sufficient aperture to introduce his person into the cavern, under the impression that the Burker slept; and if this were the case, the Englishman knew that he should be enabled to seize his enemy at a disadvantage and grapple with him successfully. He therefore pretended to sleep, while in reality continuing to keep a keen watch; and one after another he beheld four or five stones removed from their setting. He was ready at any instant to spring up and seize upon any form that might seek to introduce itself through the aperture. And sure enough, this was the intention of his enemy: for presently the aperture was completely darkened, and the form began to penetrate. Like a snake ready to dart from its coil, was the Burker prepared to spring: but whether it were that he made some slight movement, or that he suddenly held his breath in a way to convince the foe that he was not really asleep, we cannot say. Certain however it was that the enemy's form was all in a moment withdrawn, noiselessly though rapidly; and the Burker rubbing his eyes, fancied that it must be a dream: the stones were restored to their setting, just as he had originally placed them; the aperture was filled up; and only the feeble glimmerings through the interstices met his view. All this too was done with no more noise than a pin would make in falling: nor from the slightest sound could he judge at what moment his enemy retired from the vicinity of the cave. The Burker however slept no more for the remainder of that night.

When morning came, he removed his barrier, and issued cautiously from the cavern. He was miserably desponding and low-spirited. His worst fears were confirmed—the Strangler was resolved to have his life. And now, might not that mortal enemy abandon the idea of carrying on his warfare unassisted?—might he not invoke the succour of the comrade whom he had with him at the time the two travellers were murdered?—and might they not fall boldly and openly together upon the Burker during the day-time? Resolved in such a case to sell his life as dearly as possible, the man procured a stout, strong, knotted cudgel, with which he knew that he could do desperate execution. But still he felt as if frightful perils hung over his head; and how anxiously—oh! how anxiously he kept watching for the appearance of some Gossoon or other traveller who might be inclined to show a friendly spirit towards him.

Several hours passed: the sun was at its meridian height, pouring down its vertical beams,—when the Burker, sitting in the shade of the entrance to his cavern, thought that he heard a sort of splashing noise in the direction of the spring of crystal water that gushed out behind the rock. Snatching up his club, he issued forth—passed noiselessly round the rock—and found himself face to face with the Strangler. The Hindoo had most probably slipped down while endeavouring to climb that part of the rock in order to *reconnoitre* previous to an attack.

Like a wild beast did the Burker fly at the Strangler, at whom he levelled a terrific blow with his bludgeon: but the Hindoo dexterously caught the weapon with his hand; and once again did the two men close in the struggle. For several minutes it was maintained with desperate energy and on equal terms: but all in a moment, just as the Burker, after a forcefully administered kick with his heavy boot upon the bare shin of his opponent, was about to follow up the advantage gained thereby and hurl him to the ground, the Strangler fastened his sharp-pointed teeth upon the Englishman's arm. Through coat-sleeve and shirt penetrated those shark-like teeth: deep into the Burker's flesh they plunged; and the wretch roared with the pain. Then, with lightning rapidity, away flew the Strangler: out came the lasso; and it whistled through the air. But with equal rapidity did the Burker, maddened by the pain of his wound, rush in towards his foe: the noose of the lasso fell beyond him: the Strangler was stepping backward with marvellous agility, gathering in his cord at the same time to hurl it again—when he tripped over something and fell backward. The Burker was instantaneously upon him: but we should observe that the bludgeon had been dropped upon the spot where they first closed in the struggle.

Ill fared it now with the Strangler: for the Burker's knee was upon his chest, and a series of tremendous blows dealt by his stout fist, half stunned the Hindoo. The Burker seized the cord, and slipped the noose over the head of his enemy; it tightened round the Strangler's neck, startling him up into fullest life. But the Burker pulled and pulled with ferocious vigour and determination; and diminishing the length of the lasso, he applied his foot to the Strangler's back in order to attain a purchase to pull the cord more tightly still. Terrific were the writhings, the convulsions, and the contortions of the miserable Hindoo: he seemed as if he possessed a marvellous tenacity for life; and several minutes elapsed ere death put an end to his agonies. But at length he lay a corpse at the feet of the Burker.

Scarcely was the tragedy completed, when a wild and mournful cry thrilled through the torrid stagnant air; and as the Burker turned quickly round, terribly startled by that cry, he caught a transient glimpse of a human form plunging into the midst of a maze of trees at a distance. Evanescent though that glimpse were, yet did the Burker behold enough to convince him that it was the Strangler's friend whom he had just seen, and from whose lips that rueful lamentation pealed forth. Now therefore, scarcely had the Burker gotten rid of one enemy when he experienced the consciousness of being exposed to the insidious proceedings of another; and thus, in the first flush of the signal victory he had obtained, was a damp thrown upon his spirits, and he felt the necessity of being as much as ever upon his guard.

Retaining possession of the lasso with which he had achieved his conquest, the Burker dragged the dead body into the midst of some long grass at a distance;—and there he left it. Returning to his cave, he sat down to deliberate whether he should continue to abide there until the arrival of some friendly-disposed person to guide him out of the jungle—or whether he should make one more desperate effort, unassisted and alone, to find an issue from that wilderness of horrors. That the surviving Strangler would haunt him with a restless pertinacity, and watch every opportunity to avenge the death of his comrade, the Burker had no doubt. Whether, therefore, he should remain where he was to dare that danger—or whether he should once more encounter the hideous perils of the pathless jungle,—these were the alternatives which he now seriously pondered. But when he thought of all the horrors he had experienced during his wanderings—when he shudderingly remembered how the boa constrictor had flung itself down from the tree upon the tiger, and how he had heard the bones of the animal crashing and crushing in the enormous folds of the reptile—he dared not incur the chance of becoming the victim of so horrible a doom. His decision was therefore taken in favour of a continued residence at the cavern.

The remainder of that day passed without any incident worthy of importance; and when the sun was sinking towards its western couch, the Burker began to prepare his barricade as usual. The night went by without producing any subject for alarm—though for the first several hours the man could not close his eyes in slumber. At length sleep stole upon him, induced by a drowsiness which he could not possibly shake off; and he slumbered on until he was awakened by the sounds of a strange music resembling that of a flageolet, but with harsher and more discordant notes. The beams of morning were penetrating through the interstices of the barrier at the mouth of the cavern; and the Burker, starting up, rubbed his eyes,—at the same time fancying that he had heard the music only in a dream. But no:—the sounds still continued; and hastening to remove some of the upper stones of the barrier, the Burker beheld a spectacle which for a moment filled him with joy, and the next instant struck him with unspeakable horror.

CHAPTER CLVII.

THE ITINERANTS.—THE COBRA.

At a little distance from the cavern, several Hindoo natives, male and female, were seated upon the grass. They were in number perhaps a dozen; and it was the sight of these human beings which inspired the man with his first feeling of joy. But a little apart from the group sat a hideous-looking old Hindoo, with half-a-dozen cobra di capellos dancing in front of him. Behind him stood a younger man, who was playing on the pipe, or flageolet, to the music of which the hideous reptiles were thus disporting. All of a sudden the old man caught up a snake in each hand, and suffered the reptiles to coil themselves up his arms: then he took up two more, which he placed round his neck; and the remaining two he encouraged to twist themselves about his legs. The hoods of the serpents were expanded: but all the time that they twirled and coiled and twisted about the man's half-naked form, their heads and necks sustained a continuous oscillating motion, evidently in obedience to the influence of the music. It was this spectacle which so speedily turned the Burker's first feeling of joy into a cold shuddering horror.

Averting his eyes from that portion of the scene, he examined more attentively the other persons belonging to the group. They consisted of young men and women, all the latter being of an exceeding beauty. These females were dressed in short white skirts; and they had bands of linen over the bosom and passing round the back: but the interval between these slight zones, or corsets, and the skirts themselves, was left entirely bare. Their limbs were modelled to the most admirable symmetry: they were nearly all of tall figure; and their shapes were faultless. The linen bands over the bosom were so arranged, by crossing each other in the middle of the chest, to give the full rounded development to the bust itself; and in this particular they were as well formed as in their general symmetry. They were near enough for the Burker to distinguish the lustre of their fine dark eyes, as well as the pearly whiteness of the teeth that shone between the rich lips like white seeds in the midst of a fruit of luscious redness. They were lounging in voluptuous attitudes upon the grass, laughing and chatting gaily with their male companions, and now and then bestowing a look upon the old man who was exhibiting his feats with the reptiles. But to those beholders the feats themselves were evidently no novelty; and therefore the Burker imagined that the snake-charmers and the dancers all belonged to one party, and that the former (that old man and the young one with the flageolet) were merely practising their performances. That these girls and their male companions were itinerant dancers the Burker had no doubt: for he had seen such parties before, during his journey from Calcutta to Inderabad.

That the itinerants would prove friendly disposed towards him he had sufficient hope: but that they at present suspected there was any looker-on at their proceedings he had no reason to fancy. He was about to throw down the barrier and reveal himself, when the dancers, as if with one accord, all started up and began to practise their own special performances. The Burker thought that he would wait until they had finished; and he accordingly remained a still unseen spectator of all that was progressing.

The dance began, slowly at first—the girls evidently practising the most voluptuous movements of their forms. Nothing could be more sensual than their attitudes and their movements,—which they made their countenances, especially the eyes, follow as it were with a kindred expression. The young men who danced with them, imitated them in these respects: for nothing can exceed the licentiousness of these dances on the part of those professional itinerants in Hindostan.

At length the dance was concluded; and the performers threw themselves in voluptuous languor upon the grass: but still the old man continued his feats with the serpents—while the younger one sustained the strange discordant music of the flageolet. The Burker was now upon the point of throwing down the barricade and revealing himself to the itinerants,—when all of a sudden a terrific howl, or rather ferocious yell, burst upon every ear; and forth from an adjacent thicket darted an enormous tiger, apparently leaping with a single bound for at least a dozen yards. With the wildest shrieks the women sprang to their feet—while fearful cries of horror and alarm pealed from the lips of the men. Flight became general, with the single exception of the old snake-charmer; for it was upon him that the tiger pounced with that terrific bound which it made. Encircled as he was with the twisting snakes, was he thus seized by the ravenous animal, and borne off, yelling fearfully, into the thicket whence the brute had emerged. The Burker sank down in his cavern, horrified at this scene: but in a few moments the evidences of the old man's agony ceased—death had no doubt put a termination to his frightful sufferings—and he was feeding the bloodthirsty maw of the tiger.

But when the Burker ventured to peep forth again from his hiding-place, not a human form was to be seen: the dancers and the flageolet-player had all vanished. Maddened and desperate at having lost this chance of being guided forth from that dreadful wilderness, the Burker hurled down his barricade and rushed out, in the hope of distinguishing the forms of the fugitives, in whatsoever direction they had taken. But he beheld them not;—and throwing himself upon the ground, he beat his breast and tore his hair with mingled rage and disappointment. Heaven itself seemed to be warring against him. If he beheld human beings in that jungle, it was first in the form of travellers who were to be assassinated before his eyes—then in the form of Stranglers seeking his own life—or in the shape of wandering Dervishes who would have no communion with him; and lastly, when there appeared to be every prospect of falling in with friendly-disposed persons, the jungle vomited forth one of its most dreadful monsters to scare them away. No wonder that the wretched man should fling himself upon the ground, and lie writhing and convulsing there with a mental anguish as terrible as if he were enduring the agonies of death!

But after awhile the fury of his enraged disappointment abated; and he rose up from the ground. He now looked about him on the spot whence the itinerants had disappeared; and no trace of their recent presence did he behold, except a small box and a wicker basket close by the place where the old snake-charmer had been seated. Remembering now that hideous spectacle of the cobras which had filled him with so much horror, the Burker was struck aghast with the idea that those reptiles had doubtless uncoiled themselves and escaped amidst the thicket into which the old Hindoo was carried off by the tiger. In what frightful proximity therefore were these serpents now to him and to his abiding-place! The tiger too might still be lurking there; and at any moment he himself might become the animal's victim. But so desperate was his position that he became nerved as it were with a sullen moody recklessness; and gradually the idea crept into his mind that those cobras which he had seen dancing must have been deprived of their venomed fangs expressly for those performances. The Burker proceeded to open the box, which he found to contain a quantity of provisions, chiefly cold boiled rice. The basket was empty; and he had no doubt it was a receptacle for the snakes which had belonged to the unfortunate old charmer. He conveyed the box of provisions to his cavern; and at the next meal that he made he consumed the last of the spirits which remained in the gourd.

The sullen desperation of his mood having abated—or rather, we should say, given place to a returning carefulness for his life, he began to think of erecting his barricade once more, even though it were only the forenoon of the day, in order to guard against an attack on the part of the tiger. But how was it possible for him to remain shut up day and night within that cavern? No!—he felt that with such imprisonment he should go mad; he therefore resolved upon running any risk rather than dooming himself to such a tomb-like immurement. Besides, every now and then he required to slake his thirst at the spring which welled forth from behind the rocky hill, into the bowels of which the cavern penetrated. He could not therefore shut himself up altogether in the cave itself!

Several hours passed: the sun had gone considerably beyond its meridian,—when, as the Burker was standing on the top of the rocky hill, anxiously straining his eyes in the hope of discerning some human form in the distance, he was startled by a terrific rushing din on the side of a grove of tall trees about two hundred yards off. From that wood emerged at least forty or fifty elephants, speeding onwards as if goaded by some frightful apprehension that had taken possession of them all. The Burker was transfixed to the spot with terror at this spectacle. Some of the elephants were of immense size: but notwithstanding the unwieldiness of their bulky forms, they rushed on with remarkable speed, flourishing their trunks and sending forth the strangest sounds.

This herd of wild elephants seemed to be making straight for the very hill upon which the Burker was posted. On they came, trampling down the long grass, the brakes, and the thickets, in the midst of which all the lower parts of their huge uncouth forms were buried; and at length the Burker, galvanized into the sudden power of motion from his transfixed state of horrible alarm, was preparing to fly. But all in a moment he beheld the herd of elephants halt: those which were foremost turned round—and they all seemed to commence an attack upon some enemy that was in their midst. Full soon the Burker became aware what sort of an enemy this was; for the terrific howls of a tiger came pealing upon his ear. He looked on with indescribable suspense, where that strange and fearful scene was taking place. The elephants exhibited a rage and desperation which were only proportionate with the enormous peril against which they were combating. The conflict however lasted not many minutes: for all of a sudden an object was whirled up into the air—and the Burker could distinguish the tiger as it thus for an instant turned round with its lithe supple form, ere with a hideous yell it fell down again amidst its enemies. And now the Burker could see the elephants rush in upon it; and by their movements he knew that they were trampling it under foot. For a few moments its howls lasted, full of mortal agony, and growing fainter and fainter until they ceased altogether. Then away sped the elephants,—the whole herd appearing to follow one that acted as its leader. Through the wilds of the jungle went those unwieldly brutes with an astonishing degree of speed, until the wood hid them from the Burker's view.

He now began to breathe freely, as he sat down on the top of the rocky hill to rest after the exhausting effect which the tension of his feelings produced upon his physical being. But he began to reflect that he might have some reason to congratulate himself on the spectacle he had just witnessed; for it was probably the tiger which had carried off the snake-charmer, that had thus met its death amidst the infuriate elephants. At all events there was one wild beast the less in the vicinity of the cavern; and such a circumstance was a subject for self-felicitation on the part of the Burker. He remained for some while seated

on the top of the hill; and then, having again slaked his thirst with the gushing waters of the pellucid spring, he passed round the rocky eminence in order to reach the entrance of his cavern, that he might partake of his evening meal. Having eaten of his provisions, he felt an exceeding drowsiness stealing upon him, most probably from having remained so long upon the eminence exposed to the sultry fervour of the sun. So strong became this inclination to sleep, that he could not battle against it; and yet he knew that the projecting barrier was not raised at the mouth of the cavern. After a vain effort to shake off the increasing somnolence, the Burker yielded himself to it; and falling back on the ground of the cave, he sank into sleep.

Horrible dreams speedily began to troop in unto his mind: a hideous nightmare seized upon him; and he felt an oppression upon the chest that it appeared as if the hand of death itself were thus lying heavily on him. Never had his visions been so horrible before, frightful though many of his dreaming experiences had been beneath the roof of that very cavern. How long he slept he knew not: but he was suddenly startled up into complete wakefulness; and then a monstrous cobra upreared its hooded head from his breast and hissed at him. The man shrieked out in his mental agony: the cobra darted his head forward as if to seize him on the face with its fangs; and the Burker sank back insensible.

When he came back to consciousness, he shuddered with the awful recollection of what he had endured, and which now appeared to be a hideous dream. The dusk was closing in; and he started up to his feet, mechanically clutching his club which lay by his side. Still trembling and quivering all over under the influence of his hideous recollections—with the perspiration standing cold and clammy upon his forehead—the Burker was rushing out of the cavern, when a horrible hissing smote his ears; and within a yard of his foot the monstrous cobra raised itself up to dart at him. He sprang back,—at the same instant hurling his club at the reptile. The blow was well aimed: it struck down the cobra, which lay writhing upon the bed of granite in front of the cavern. With a stone, hastily snatched up, the Burker despatched his enemy.

It was no vision, then, which had haunted him during his slumber!—it was a terrific reality; and he had slept with a cobra upon his breast! The man's form kept convulsing and shuddering with nervous horror at the bare idea. Indeed, many minutes elapsed ere he could regain sufficient self-possession for deliberate thought. Then the reflection began to creep into his mind that the cobra he had just destroyed must be one of those that he had seen with the snake-charmer, and that his notion of the morning was correct: namely, that its fangs had been withdrawn. For if this were not the case, how could he possibly have escaped with his life? But the incident made the Burker aware of one thing—which was that his mat of granite fragments in front of the cavern was not a complete protection against the intrusion of reptiles.

He had now therefore scarcely any heart to take the trouble of building up the barricade at the mouth of his cave. He felt as if he could lay himself down and die,—as if it were impossible to bear up any longer against the accumulating horrors of his position. He was utterly desponding. But still death came not to his call, though he was most painfully conscious of how it might seek him unawares—stealthily and insidiously, by the hand of a Strangler—or violently and abruptly by the jaws of a tiger. He therefore mustered up resolution sufficient for the formation of his barricade; and when the task was accomplished, he sat down in the deepest dejection, in the darkness of his abiding-place.

The night passed without any incident worthy of notice; and when the Burker issued from the cave in the morning, he ascended the little eminence, as was his wont, to ascertain if he could descry any human form in the neighbourhood. He had not been stationed there many minutes, ere he beheld some one advancing through the jungle; and as the person drew nearer, the Burker perceived that he was a Gossoon. The man's heart leapt for joy as he thought that now at last deliverance from that dreadful wilderness was at hand; for he resolved that if the dervish, imitating the example of his predecessors, should refuse him his guidance, he would compel him by violence to succour him in that sense, or else would pertinaciously dog his footsteps and thus be led from the jungle. As the Gossoon drew nearer still, the Burker discerned that he was one of the lowest of the sect of religious itinerants—in fact a wandering begger, dependent on the alms of charity. These facts his garb and general appearance announced; while his looks were of the most forbidding character. He was about fifty years of age: his hair and beard were grissled; and he had a strong cast in one eye, which added to his sinister aspect.

The Gossoon seemed surprised for a few moments g an European there; but the Burker, deeming it the most prudent course to assume a demeanour of entreaty, descended from the top of the hillock and made signs to implore the Gossoon to lead him forth from the jungle. The itinerant religionist made some sign of impatience in reply, and at once proceeded to the cave. There he looked in the niche underneath the loophole; and on discovering the Burker's knapsack, he opened it. An expression of delight appeared on his sinister features on finding a provision of boiled rice inside; and coming forth to the entrance of the cavern, he sat himself down to partake of the food. He ate it in a manner so ravenous as to indicate that his fast must have been a long one; and the Burker, thinking to do him a pleasure, took up the gourd, at the same time intimating by a sign that he would go and fill it with water. The Gossoon did not however appear to take any notice of him, so busied was he in cramming the cold boiled rice down his throat. The Burker hastened to fill the gourd at the spring which welled forth behind the rocky hill; and returning to the Gossoon, he presented it to him. But the dervish, with a growl as savage and as sullen as if it came from the throat of a wild beast, repulsed the gourd so rudely that it dropped from the Burker's hand; and then the Gossoon, taking a small flask from the folds of his garments, drained its contents, whatever they were, to the very bottom. Having done this—and without taking any more notice of the Burker—he rose, entered the cavern, threw himself lazily down, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

For a moment the Burker was deeply incensed at the rough uncouth manner in which his gourd had been rejected; and he could not help thinking likewise that in return for his civility the Gossoon might have spared him a drop of the contents of his flask. He did not however make any demonstration of his anger: he thought it better to let the brutal Hindoo enjoy the slumber of which he might possibly find himself in great need after a toilsome journey; and the Burker consoled himself with the hope that when the Gossoon should wake up, the time for his deliverance from the depths of that horrible jungle would be at hand.

Hours passed; still the Gossoon slept on; and still the Burker sat at the entrance of the cavern, anxiously awaiting the moment when the Hindoo should arouse himself. All the rice was gone from the knapsack; for the Gossoon had made light work of the provision which it contained. This was however scarcely a source of uneasiness to the Burker for the present; for he felt assured that his strange companion must have the consciousness of being speedily enabled to procure another supply. And while thus reflecting, the Burker buoyed himself up with the hope that probably they were not so far from the extremity of the jungle as he had previously imagined—or that the Gossoon was acquainted with some outlet that would speedily take them to an inhabited spot.

But time passed on—the day was wearing away—and still the Gossoon slept. The Burker might have supposed that the man was dead, were it not for the unmistakable indications of life which the nasal sounds of his slumber gave forth. Though looking to that dervish as the means by which he hoped to escape from the jungle, the Burker nevertheless hated him—not so much for his uncouth conduct, as for this procrastination of the journey which he expected to enter upon under his guidance.

For that entire day did the Burker remain sitting in front of the cavern, with the exception of two or three temporary absences to slake his thirst at the spring; and as the sun drew nearer and nearer to the western horizon, the impatience of the Burker grew into a perfect rage. Oh, how he hated that Gosscon!—in what bitter aversion did he hold him—he could have even killed him, so tremendous at length grew his vexation and his spite when he beheld him continuing to enjoy a slumber so profound that it appeared as if it never could have a waking.

At length the Burker, utterly bereft of all patience, was about to lay his hand on the Gosscon's shoulder and shake him with an enraged violence that would speedily dispel his slumber, when the dervish suddenly started up to a sitting posture. He rubbed his eyes—looked at the Burker with a certain air of astonishment as if having totally forgotten that he had seen such a person in that place before—and then springing up, he hastened to inspect the niche underneath the loophole. But there was no food in it; and the Gosscon gave such a hideous howl of rage that the Burker was for an instant frightened lest the sound proceeded from the throat of some wild animal in the immediate neighbourhood. The Gosscon advanced towards the Burker, making threatening signs — pointing to the vacant niche and the empty knapsack, as much as to accuse him of having devoured the provisions which ought to be there? The Burker's temper, never the sweetest at any time, was particularly ruffled by the entire conduct of the Gosscon; and forgetting his conciliatory policy, he replied by signs that were irate and menacing. A terrific expression of rage swept over the Gosscon's countenance; and suddenly seizing the Burker with both arms round the body, he lifted him up and dashed him down upon the granite blocks which lay close by the mouth of the cavern.

Herculean was the strength of the Gosscon—a strength too that was exercised with a skill and expertness which made the achievement the work of a single instant. Powerless as a dwarf in the hands of a giant—and taken completely unawares—the Burker was utterly unable to offer any resistance; so that with lightning rapidity did he find himself thus thrown, half-stunned, upon the granite blocks. There he lay for a few instants; and as he slowly picked himself up, it was in the most sombre sullenness of mood that he submitted to this treatment without an effort to avenge it. For in the midst of the concentrated rage and vindictive spite which filled his soul, was the consciousness that even if he had the power to slay the Gosscon, it would be an act of madness, thereby cutting off this last remaining chance of escape from the jungle. For the same reason too, he doggedly resolved to return to his conciliatory policy towards the man on whom he felt himself to be so completely dependent.

The Gosscon surveyed him with a kind of sombre contempt as he slowly raised himself to his feet; and then he grinned with a horrible satisfaction, as if contented with having shown the European that he was his master. That he was well acquainted with the cave the Burker had already perceived, from the fact of his searching the niche so promptly after his arrival; and another proof thereof was now furnished by the circumstance that the Gosscon passed round to the back of the well to drink of the water. The sun was by this time beginning to set; and the Burker therefore knew that it was useless to think of setting out upon a journey through the jungle during the hours of the night. He made a sign to the Gosscon to the effect that he would pile up the stones at the mouth of the cavern: but the itinerant Dervish burst out into a scornful laugh, as if ridiculing such a precaution or means of defence. He set to work to gather together a quantity of dried wood; and he made a sign to the Burker to imitate his example. Fearlessly the Gosscon plunged into the long grass in the thicket, and tore down some branches of the most resinous trees. When an immense quantity of fuel was thus collected, the Gosscon arranged it in the form of a semicircle near the front of the cave; and churlishly motioning the Burker to follow him within the rampart, he set fire to it by the means of ignition which he carried about his person. He then threw himself down in the cavern; and composing himself to sleep, was soon wrapped once more in a slumber as profound as that which throughout the livelong day he had enjoyed.

But the Burker could not sleep. He was half famished with hunger: he trembled lest the Strangler should insidiously work his way, despite the fire, into the cave: he was afraid likewise of the repulsive Gosscon who lay snoring at a little distance. Perhaps the wretch, thought the Burker, was only pretending to be asleep in order to watch an opportunity of taking his life?—though he certainly could not see of what avail such a proceeding would be to the Hindoo. The fire continued to burn steadily for a long time; and as there was no wind, but the night-air was still and stagnant, the smoke beat not into the cavern, but ascended straight upward. At length a sensation of drowsiness began to steal upon the Burker; and after several vain efforts to shake it off, he yielded to its influence. He fell asleep.

Horrible dreams haunted him, as usual; for the mind reproduced with added horror the waking thoughts of the wretched man; and now in imagination he beheld the dead Strangler's companion stealing upon him: he saw the hideous Gosscon bending over him with a terrible ferocity of countenance, and with a long sharp instrument in his hand. Then he fancied that he was in the depths of the jungle's wilds, pursued by a tiger—that he strove to fly—but that his feet became as heavy as if they had turned into lead, and he could not escape the ravenous animal that was every instant gaining upon him. But all of a sudden the subject of his visions changed; and he was writhing and convulsing in the huge folds of a boa constrictor. With a shriek of agony he awoke.

He was lying in the cave: the duskiness of night still prevailed—the fire had sunk into a semicircular pile of smouldering embers, just throwing out light sufficient to show him the eyes of the Gosscon staring wide open as the mendicant dervish still lay stretched along the floor of the cave at a little distance. In which direction the eye with the horrible squint was looking, the Burker scarcely knew: but the other was fixed upon himself with (he fancied) the gleaming malignity of a reptile's. Then the Gossoon began convulsing and writhing; and all of a sudden he sent forth so wild a yell that it made the Burker literally bound up in horrible alarm, while the blood seemed to congeal in his veins. The Gossoon burst out into a savage laugh, and made signs to show that he was only imitating everything that the Burker had just been doing. Deep but low was the curse which in his own vernacular the Burker gave as he found himself thus rendered the sport of the malignant mockery of that hated Gossoon. But the mendicant Hindoo continued to laugh for some moments; and it seemed to the Burker as if he were thus listening to the malice-mirth of a fiend.

When the Gossoon had finished his hideous cachinnation, he composed himself to sleep again: but the Burker could not close his eyes in slumber any more. In a couple of hours the sun rose—the Gossoon still slept—and the Burker issued forth from the cavern.

CHAPTER CLVIII.

THE GOSSOONS.

HAVING slaked his thirst, which was poignant and most oppressive—for his parched lips were cracked with the fever-heat of his blood, and his tongue was as dry as if he had been swallowing some of the embers of the now extinct fire—the Burker was returning to the mouth of the cavern to await in hope the Gossoon's awakening, when he espied another human form approaching from a little distance. This speedily proved to be a man of the same sect as the Hindoo who had already become the Burker's companion. He was a mendicant Gossoon more wretchedly clad if possible—more filthy in his person, and more repulsive in his looks, than even the other. He was upwards of sixty years of age, and exceedingly tall—without any stoop—but with a frame so emaciated that it was painful to contemplate the parts which his rags left bare. He had a look half savage, half austere; and he growled upon the Burker as if regarding him as an intruder in that spot.

Without however taking any farther notice of him, this old Gossoon proceeded straight to the cavern; and the Burker, following, perceived that the other itinerant suddenly woke up, as if with the instinctive knowledge that an expected friend was at hand. Their greetings were however sullenly and moodily exchanged; and the new-comer almost immediately produced a bag which he carried hidden amongst his rags. Thence he took forth rice, fruits, and fragments of coarse barley bread; and the two Gossoons began to eat with a ravenous appetite. The Burker, half famished, advanced in a supplicating manner towards them; and then the younger Gossoon began telling his comrade something which the Burker speedily understood to be a narrative of the effects produced upon himself by the dreams of the past night. For that malignant Gossoon again went through the imitation of the Burker's convulsive writhings: [illegible] iving vent to another mocking yell more hideous than even that by which he had so startled the English outcast a short while back. The elder Gossoon laughed with a low inward chuckling which was horrible to hear; and then he contemptuously tossed the Burker a part of his provisions. The bag was a large one; and even when three people had partaken of its contents, enough provender evidently remained for three or four more meals of the same extent as this first one. But the old Gossoon had brought with him no liquor; and the crystal spring accordingly supplied the means of washing down the food that was then partaken of.

When the repast was ended, the elder Gossoon addressed in his own language some question to the Burker: but the latter by signs intimated that he was ignorant of what was thus said to him. It soon transpired that the Gossoons themselves were equally at a loss to understand the Englishman; and the two itinerants accordingly conversed together, taking no further notice of the Burker. This individual waited with anxious suspense for some indication of their future plans or movements: but for three mortal hours they stirred not; and when their colloquy was ended, they stretched themselves down to sleep.

The rage and impatience which the wretched outcast had experienced on the preceding day, were now excelled by the feelings which took possession of him when he saw those lazy vagabonds so tranquilly and unconcernedly compose themselves to slumber. But what could he do? He must bide their good-will and pleasure; and to the utmost of his power he must render himself agreeable to them, for fear lest they should leave him behind, as the other Gossoons had done, on taking their departure. He therefore strove to assuage his boiling impatience—to appease his irritated feelings—and to sustain himself with the hope that the moment for egress from that dreadful jungle must come at last.

The Gossoons slept on; and the sun was again sinking towards the western horizon before they awoke. Then the provision-bag was again opened; and a ration was bestowed upon the Burker, though not to the same extent as that which each Gossoon took for himself. The meal being disposed of, they made signs for him to procure them water in the gourd; and then they intimated that he was to collect the firewood to be arranged at the mouth of the cavern. He comprehended that they were using him as their slave: but he was compelled to submit. It was however with shuddering horror that he plunged into the thickets to gather the branches: but the task was achieved without any circumstance calculated to justify his alarm. The pile was built up: the three passed into the cavern; and the wood was lighted. The two Gossoons were speedily buried in profoundest slumber; and the Burker, worn out in mind and body, fell asleep more quickly than on the preceding night. His dreams were again horrible—but not characterised by the same evidences of distress on his part as those which we have described: or at least if they were, he himself awoke in ignorance of the fact—and at all events the Gossoons did not seem to have been disturbed. These itinerants did not awake until some while after sunrise: then the provision-bag was produced—the Burker filled the gourd from the spring—and the morning meal was partaken of. Afterwards the two Gossoons ascended the hillock; and both looked intently in the same direction from which they themselves had respectively come,—as if they were awaiting another arrival. The Burker began to fear that if the company of Gossoons were increased, he might be abandoned by them, as he was by those who had taken away the dead body with them;—and painful misgivings agitated in the wretched man's soul. That day passed like the preceding one,—the Gossoons sleeping for hours together—the Burker watching at the mouth of the cavern—and having to collect the firewood in the evening. No other Gossoon made his appearance: there was no fresh arrival of any kind; and another night was passed in the cavern.

Again, in the morning, when the meal had been partaken of—and which meal completely emptied the bag,—the two Gossoons ascended the hillock, the Burker following them. No new-comer was to be seen; and there the Gossoons sat, watching in silence for a couple of hours until the heat of the sun became intolerable with its sultriness. Then the dervishes gave vent to ejaculations of mingled rage, astonishment, and disappointment: and the Burker had no difficulty in comprehending the cause. They evidently expected some person or persons, who however came not. They descended into the cavern, and stretched themselves to slumber,—the Burker taking his accustomed post just within the entrance, so as to shade himself against the piercing rays of the sun. It was evening when the Gossoons awoke; and then they both hastened with avidity to inspect the niche under the loophole: but there were no provisions there. They made impatient signs to the Burker to inquire whether any one had been?—and on his signaling a negative, they looked as if they were very much inclined to wreak their rage upon himself. It was indeed with a sort of menacing peremptoriness that they pointed to the thicket as an intimation that he should gather the firewood; and he hastened to obey—for he was now more than ever afraid of these men. His fears in that respect so operated upon his mind as to enhance the poignancy of the apprehensions with which he set foot in the thicket—the lurking place of the reptile, and which had likewise recently proved the ambush of the tiger. While treading amidst the long grass, he fancied that cobras were coiling up his legs; and the ice-chill of terror struck to the very marrow of his bones. Upon those bones too did the flesh appear to creep, as he approached the trees from which he had to tear away the branches—those trees whence the fatal coils of the boa constrictor might possibly unwind to fling down its huge slimy length and envelope his form. But his task was achieved without the occurrence of any of these terrible casualties; and he set to work to pile up the wood in front of the cavern.

Whether it were that he was not quick enough in his movements to please the elder Gossoon—or that this individual required some object on whom to wreak the vindictive spite with which hunger filled him—we cannot say: but certain it is that with an ejaculation of rage, he snatched up a stout branch and dealt the Burker a savage blow upon the head. In a moment the Englishman flew like a tiger at the Hindoo: but the latter, suddenly skipping aside, caught the Burker round the waist, just as the other Gossoon had done, and hurled him to a distance with as much ease as if he were merely thus tossing away from him an infant child. Again was the Burker compelled to put up with the rough treatment so sustained; and he had a severe experience that the strength of the elder Gossoon, emaciated a wretch though he were, was in no way inferior to that of his younger companion. Both were his masters, and seemed resolved to prove themselves so. In a mood of sullen resignation and dogged submission, did the Burker continue his task; and when it was completed, he and the two Gossoons stretched themselves supperless to repose. The itinerants speedily slept: but the cravings of hunger kept the Burker awake for the greater part of the night. At length sleep visited his eyes also; and if his dreams were less horrible than usual, it was perhaps because he had all the less to tax or trouble his digestive organs.

In the morning the Gossoons again ascended to the top of the hill,—again too followed by the Burker, who was as much interested as themselves in the arrival of any one bearing a supply of provisions. But no approaching form was to be seen. Crashing through the jungle at a little distance, was that phenomenon, a white elephant—called an *albino*: but it was speedily lost to the view—and the straining eyes of the two Gossoons and the Burker were again riveted in the direction whence the former evidently expected an arrival. And now, the Burker's ideas changing, he began to hope that no one would come after all; for in this case he saw the necessity of the Gossoons leaving the cavern and betaking themselves to the nearest inhabited spot where provisions might be procured,—in which case he was resolved to accompany or to dog them, unless overpowered by their superior brute force.

All of a sudden, however, ejaculations of joy burst from the lips of the Gossoons; for they, with eyes more accustomed to mark the movements of human beings in their own native land, than the Burker's could possibly be, beheld some one advancing. In a short time the Burker himself discerned the form which came hastening along with light step; for the expected individual was quite young. He likewise was a Gossoon—not above two or three and twenty years of age; and he was as remarkable for his personal beauty as those whom he came to join were for their ugliness. He was of the medium stature—slender and well made—with a faultless aquiline profile, and superb eyes. He was attired with somewhat more neatness than the other Gossoons—but still in a poor style; and his person displayed more cleanly habits. He had at his back a wallet, or knapsack, of considerable size: he advanced rapidly, and soon joined the Gossoons and the Burker, who descended from the top of the hillock.

When the new-comer cast a look of wondering inquiry upon the Burker, the Gossoon who had first of all arrived at the cavern, gave a few hasty words of explanation—as the object of the remarks could understand; while the eldest Gossoon, with hands of greedy impatience and ravenous looks, began to take off the knapsack from the newcomer's shoulders. On being opened, it was found to contain a quantity of provisions of a better sort than any the Burker had as yet seen in the jungle. There were not only rice and fruits, but cakes of bread and pieces of cold meat; and the Gossoons quickly sat down to the welcome meal. The Burker was liberally treated in respect to the food on the present occasion; and when the flask which the young Gossoon produced, had passed round from his own lips to those of his friends, the Burker was not forgotten. He found it to contain the same sort of potent spirit as that which the gourd of the assassinated travellers had furnished him; and encouraged by the apparent friendliness of the Gossoons, he imbibed a deep draught.

The meal being over, the Gossoons proceeded to stretch themselves to sleep in the cavern,—the handsome young new-comer following in this respect the example of his ugly elder comrades. The Burker experienced the soporific effect of the potent alchohol: and yielding to drowsiness, he likewise laid himself down in the cave. Slumber soon stole upon his eyes; and when he awoke the sun was considerably past the meridian. But the Gossoons—where were they? They were not to be seen!

Half wild with despair, the Burker ascended to the top of the rocky hill: but no—not a glimpse of them could he obtain! They had evidently abandoned him to his fate in that horrible wilderness! He cried aloud in his anguish: he mingled lamentations with imprecations: he beat his breast—tore his hair—and dashed his clenched fists violently against his brow. At length his rage began to moderate, even if his distress of mind were not alleviated. He saw that it was useless to trust to travelling Gossoons as guides from the depths of that jungle; and despite all dangers, he would make one more desperate effort to issue thence, or die in the attempt. He bethought himself that all three of the Gossoons had come from precisely the same direction; and it was altogether in an *opposite* direction that his own former attempts had been made to issue from the jungle. Surely those men must have journeyed from a village or hamlet at no great distance? At all events he was determined to push forward in that direction: for sooner than endure the prolonged horrors of the jungle, he would dare all its ghastliest, frightfulest perils!

Having slaked his thirst at the crystal spring—and armed with his stout bludgeon—the Burker set out upon his journey. He strove to call to his aid all his most stubborn courage and dogged resolution. When floundering through the long grass where reptiles might lurk, he said to himself that it was better to die by the bite of the cobra than to endure the long agony of terror, with the prospect of famine in the cave he had just left. When forced by the circumstances of his route to pass near a tree, he strove to persuade himself that it were better to render up existence in the crushing folds of the boa constrictor, than to linger out that life in the awful solitude of the cavern. Or again, when passing near a stream, he thought it were preferable to risk being devoured by the jaws of an alligator, than to continue to be whirled onward by a hurricane of agonizing alarms and a sense of excruciating perils. It was in this manner the wandering outcast endeavoured to sustain his spirits; but, oh! how desperate must he have felt his case to be when it admitted of such horrible consolations!

For about two hours had he advanced, steadily pursuing the direction from which the Gossoons had come—when on emerging upon a sward of short sweet grass, he beheld a dark object lying at a little distance. On approaching it, he found to his surprise that it was the wallet which the youngest Gossoon had brought with him in the morning. On opening it, the Burker found that it contained a considerable quantity of the provender with which it was crammed when first produced; and his wonder was now succeeded by joy. But surprise was soon uppermost again; and this became blended with terror likewise—for how could the wallet be there unless something had happened to the young Gossoon himself? And if he had become a prey to a wild beast, might not that same ferocious animal be still lurking in the neighbourhood? The Burker now discerned upon the grass the traces of footsteps; and, Oh! with what curdling of the blood did he likewise distinguish the spots where the paws of a wild beast—most probably a tiger—had been!

Some minutes elapsed before he could sufficiently compose himself to appropriate the wallet and strap it over his shoulders. He then continued his way—looking around him with cold shuddering apprehension—when *his foot kicked* against something; and recoiling from the contact, he perceived that it was a human bone. Several other bones lay scattered about; and there was a dark stain upon the ground which confirmed all the dreadful tale. It was a horrible spectacle!—horrible would it have been even for one surveying it with a consciousness of perfect security—but infinitely *more* horrible for one who felt that at any instant he might share the fate of his predecessor on that spot! Close by, too, there were the fragments of apparel: and now the Burker knew, beyond the possibility of doubt, that it was the *young* Gossoon who had been devoured by a wild beast.

He rushed on, almost maddened with horror, from the spot. He forgot the Strangler—the boa-constrictor—the cobra—the panther—the elephant—and the alligator: he thought of nothing but the tiger. But when another hour had elapsed, and he had continued his way without any fresh alarm, his spirits began to revive somewhat. That the two elder Gossoons had fled from the spot where their more juvenile comrade met so hideous a fate was tolerably evident. Might he not therefore overtake them?—and if so, might he not induce them to serve as his guides? or in any case might he not follow them from a distance?

While he was looking straight before him, with straining eyes to see if he could discern any human forms moving in the distance,—he fancied that his ear caught the sounds of plaintive moans in his immediate vicinage. He stopped and listened. Yes—it was assuredly so; and they appeared to emanate from the foot of a tree about twenty yards off. This tree was completely withered: there was not a single leaf upon it; and thus the eye of the Burker could easily scan all its skeleton branches. No boa constrictor was coiled there; and a horrible feeling of curiosity, surmounting his alarms, led him to draw nearer and nearer by slow degrees towards the foot of that blasted tree. For the moans still continued to reach his ears; and though disguised as it were by their very plaintiveness, yet had he the conviction that they came from a human tongue. All of a sudden the thicket through which he was advancing, ceased; and then a frightful spectacle met his eyes. For there, at the foot of the tree, lay the eldest of the three Gossoons, encircled in the folds of a boa constrictor, whose tail was coiled round the lower part of that tree's trunk. The reptile raised its head on beholding the Burker—who did not however remain there another instant to contemplate more of that scene of stupendous horror: but he fled, goaded by the agonizing apprehension that the snake might quit its hold upon the Gossoon and mark himself as its prey instead. On he ran,—until breathless and exhausted, he reached a rocky eminence; and on the slope he threw himself down. There he lay for some minutes, until his presence of mind began to return; and he reflected with shuddering horror upon what he had seen. Two of the Gossoons had met a hideous fate:—had the third escaped? or was he likewise doomed to perish in the jungle, to the perils of which *he* as well as *they* had abandoned a fellow-creature? And would the Burker himself issue with his life from that wilderness of dangers—that wild and awful district where death was to be confronted in so many ghastly, frightful, and appalling shapes?

The Burker sat in a desponding mood,—asking himself these questions, and reflecting on all these things,—when it struck him that he heard a slight rustling sound higher up behind; and starting with the idea that a reptile was gliding towards him, he just escaped the noose of a lasso which was thrown at his head. For there, upon that rocky eminence, stood the Strangler—the remaining companion of him whom the Burker had slain. With a cry of vindictive rage, the Burker sprang up the slope, on the top of which the shark-teethed Hindoo tarried to meet him.

Now for another battle—another conflict—another struggle, to which the only end that could be expected was the death of one of these mortal foes!

A glance showed the Burker that the Strangler had in his hands no other weapon than the lasso: a simultaneous glance made the Hindoo aware that the Englishman had no visible weapon but his club. Yet neither knew whether the other might not have a knife or dagger, or even a pistol, concealed about the person. With his club held up over his head—alike as a means of defence against the lasso, and to be in readiness to deal a terrific blow—the Burker rushed on to the combat. The Strangler stood firm, holding his cord in a peculiar manner; and as the Burker drew near, that lasso was thrown out with such sudden violence that the knot of the noose struck him upon the mouth. The blood gushed forth; and he was for an instant staggered:—but maddened with the pain, he made one bound towards his enemy. The Strangler darted aside, and gathered up his lasso with incredible rapidity for the purpose of using it again: but the Burker's club reached his left arm, as a blow was dealt with all the energy of the infuriate Englishman. That arm fell crushed and powerless by the Strangler's side: but the right hand again threw forth the lasso,—and again too with more or less effect. It struck the Burker in the middle of the forehead, with such violence as to make him reel even more than the former blow; and lightning appeared to gleam before his eyes. But again did he rush towards the Strangler, who however darted back; and the lasso was once more whistling through the air,—its noose this time being thrown at the Burker's neck. It was a marvel that he avoided it,—and yet he did. Then, at the same instant, he hurled his cudgel with all his might at the Strangler: it struck the Hindoo a tremendous blow upon the face; and the wretch toppled over the side of the rock, which in that direction was precipitous.

The Burker looked down into the abyss of about thirty feet in depth; and there he beheld the Strangler darting away: for, to the Englishman's astonishment, his opponent had evidently alighted on his feet. The lasso having fallen from the Strangler's hand, lay upon the top of the rock; and it was now evident that the Hindoo miscreant himself had experienced enough of the conflict for the present occasion. He was flying; and the Burker remained a victor upon the battle-ground.

At a very little distance a broad stream was rolling; and the thought struck the Burker that he would pursue his enemy and despatch him altogether. That river appeared to bar the Strangler's progress; for how could he swim across it with the use only of his right arm? And the stream made so sweeping a curve likewise, that if the Strangler followed its course along its bank, either to the right hand or to the left, it would bring him again in close proximity to the rock, which now seemed to serve as a fortalice commanding the entire position; so that the Burker conceived that he had only to sally down on either side, according to circumstances, and cut off the Strangler's retreat.

All these ideas passed through the Burker's mind during the space of the few moments in which the Strangler was fleeing towards the river. Straight he went, neither diverging to the right nor or the left!—straight to the centre of the arc formed by that bend of the stream! The weeds, the sedges, and the grass grew high upon the river's bank:—through that margining fringe rushed the Strangler, so that the Burker now became suddenly convinced that his foe did really intend to pass it by swimming, or by fording it—if it were indeed fordable. An imprecation burst from the Englishman's lips at the idea that the Hindoo would after all escape him!

But what is that dark object which suddenly appears amongst the weeds and sedges? The Strangler turns to retrace his way: that object is close behind him:—its whole form is now developed:—it is a tremendous alligator! The Hindoo no longer flies in a straight direction: he turns round and round, describing small circles, so as to avoid the long jaws of the unwieldy monster, which turns likewise. It is a scene of horrible excitement for the Burker, who beholds it all from the summit of that rock. For upwards of ten minutes does the spectacle, as strange as it is frightful, endure—the Strangler describing those circles which constitute the charm by which only is his life safe—the monster perseveringly turning and turning likewise, but unable to clutch the man in its vast gaping jaws. All in a moment the Strangler disappears from the Burker's view: he has either fallen through giddiness, or terror, or exhaustion—or he has tripped over something. The alligator makes one forward movement—he lifts his head up—the Strangler is lying cross-wise in his jaws!

Horrible as this incident was, it only for the instant produced one effect upon the Burker—namely, that of a savage satisfaction to find that he was rid of his remaining enemy. Soon however the feeling stole over him that he himself might be destined to feed a maw as ravenous as that which had just devoured his treacherous foe; and again, for the thousandth time since he first became a wanderer amidst the wilds of that jungle, did a cold shudder sweep through his entire frame. His eyes were still riveted upon the river's bank; and he beheld the alligator plunge into the water.

The Burker now pursued his way. He walked rapidly; for he had collected all his energies for this last attempt to find an egress from the jungle. To his delight he found that his path became more easy—that he could proceed for long intervals without being compelled to plunge into thickets, or drag his feet through the rank luxuriance of herbage where reptiles might lurk. The high trees too were fewer and farther between; and remembering how insensibly as it were the jungle commenced, he began to flatter himself with the hope that it was now drawing to an end,—gradually losing its wildness and its horrors, as it merged into the cultivated parts of the country that lay beyond.

As he was proceeding, he suddenly beheld a human form at a little distance; and quickening his pace, he soon acquired the certainty that it was the surviving Gossoon who was toiling slowly along. Presently that itinerant looked round; and the Burker, with a heart leaping joyously, sped forward to join him: for there was no longer a doubt that he had at last reached the extremity of the jungle.

Welcome as is the sight of land to the storm-tossed mariner who without compass has been drifting hither and thither amidst the perils of the ocean,—was the spectacle which now greeted the Burker's view. For in the horizon he beheld the outlines of buildings; and all the interval between the verge of the jungle and that town was occupied by cultivated lands. Here and there, too, a cottage appeared; and the wanderer felt as if he were entering upon the confines of civilisation once more. The Gossoon was waiting for him to come up. Be it remembered that this was the first of the three who had appeared at the cave,—the one whose inveterate habit of sleeping had so terribly irritated the Burker.

On approaching the Gossoon, the Englishman perceived that his countenance was haggard and careworn, and still had a frightened look as if the influence of horrors which had happened hours back yet remained upon his mind. The itinerant quickly descried the well-furnished wallet slung at the Burker's back; and the expression of his countenance suddenly changed from careworn haggardness to a selfish and rapacious satisfaction. He was about to make a spring at it, when the Burker, brandishing his club, menacingly made him a sign to keep off. The Gossoon laughed with a leer of low cunning, as much as to imply that the Burker felt he was now in a situation to command; and then assuming a lugubrious aspect, he imitated the bound of a tiger. The Burker comprehended what he meant—nodded his head—pointed to the wallet—and then made a motion as if picking up something from the ground—thereby showing how he had found that wallet on the spot where its recent possessor had fed the maw of the tiger. Then the squinting dervish in his turn made another sign—walked slowly on, imitating the gait of the emaciated old Gossoon—and all of a sudden halted, showing by rapid movements of his hand how the immense snake had darted forth upon that unfortunate comrade of his, and imitating likewise the wretch's writhings and convulsions when encircled by the folds of the serpent. The Burker nodded significantly, and made signs to show how he himself had seen the old Gossoon fast locked in the deadly coils of the boa constrictor. He likewise gave the Gossoon to understand that when he beheld the wretch, he was still alive and moaning plaintively. The dervish comprehended the Burker's meaning; and he gave vent to low half-subdued howls and moans of lamentation: but whether they were real or affected, it was impossible for the Burker to conjecture. At length the Gossoon made an end of his whining; and the Burker thought that he would now share his provisions with the itinerant, whom indeed he meant to make his companion; for moneyless as he was, he did not exactly see how he was to live without some such aid. As for any future prospects, the Burker really had none; for such was his position that he was forced to abandon himself entirely to chance.

The Gossoon seemed to treat with a sort of calm indifference the fact of the Burker producing the provisions from the wallet; and when they sat down together the itinerant began eating with a voracity that threatened to consume its contents altogether—or at least as much of them as he could secure for his own special behoof. The Burker made a sign for him to be sparing with the provisions: but the Gossoon pointed confidently in the direction of the town, as much as to imply that they could obtain an ample replenishment there. The Burker was well pleased with this tacit but perfectly intelligible announcement; and giving the rein to his appetite, he ate without farther parsimony in respect to the provender. The wallet was thus completely emptied.

The Gossoon now began making signs to intimate that the Burker should become his companion—a proposition which the ruffian received with so much veritable joy that it betrayed to the dervish his consciousness of how helpless he would be if left to himself. Thereupon the Gossoon nodded in a patronising manner, and seemed to be seeking to give him to understand that he would take him under his protection. But snatching up the Burker's cudgel, he hurled it to a distance; and then he made signs to show that he considered himself and the Englishman to be upon equal terms. The Burker growlingly muttered an imprecation: but remembering the evidence of superior strength which the Gossoon had given him at the cave, he thought it better to submit to these terms of equality on which the incident had just placed them.

The Gossoon now rose and pointed towards the town: the Burker, likewise rising to his feet, pre-

pared to accompany him. They journeyed on in silence; and the Englishman had thus ample leisure to give free scope to his reflections. Comparatively a few hours had sufficed to bring him from the cave to the extremity of the jungle: but on the former occasion of his endeavour to find an issue from the wilderness, he had taken another direction and had thus only floundered farther and farther into its depths. Whether he was still in the kingdom of Inderabad, he knew not: but he was very certain that when first entering the jungle after his flight from imprisonment in the capital city of that kingdom, he had not passed through the region where he now found himself. When in the jungle, and exposed to all its horrors, he would cheerfully have fallen in with any of Queen Indora's emissaries who might have been sent in pursuit of him: but now that he was clear beyond the limits of that awful wilderness, he entertained the precisely opposite feeling, and trembled at the thought of being recaptured and conducted back to Inderabad. Thus it was of some consequence to him to learn whether he was still within the range of Queen Indora's jurisdiction: but how could he possibly ascertain?—for no intelligible word could he exchange with the Gossoon. Trusting therefore to some fortuitous circumstance to impart the intelligence which he required, he walked on with his companion.

In about an hour and a half—as the sun was sinking into its western bed—they reached the outskirts of the town, which was one of moderate size. As they entered the streets, the Burker looked about to see if there were any English soldiers or Sepoys, such as he had seen in Calcutta and other places in Anglo-India through which he had passed when journeying as a prisoner in the suite of Queen Indora and her royal husband: but he beheld none of those indications of a British possession. The Gossoon led him on through several streets, until they reached a small low building consisting of two rooms, and which was a sort of charitable institution where wayfarers might rest themselves and cook their rice without having anything to pay for the accommodation. There were several other Gossoons in this place, and to whom the Burker's companion was evidently well known. They had plenty of rice and other provisions, which they liberally shared with the new-comers. When the meal was over, the Burker's friend borrowed a few copper coins of the other Gossoons; and he then beckoned the Englishman to accompany him. They went out together, and proceeded to a shop where articles of cutlery were sold. Here the Gossoon purchased a couple of common rudely-constructed knives, the blades of which were fixed in the handles dagger-shaped; so that indeed they resembled oyster-knives. A piece of cork was stuck on each point; and the Gossoon, giving the Burker one, made a sign for him to secure it about his person. He then led the way back to the khan, or public accommodation-house; and there some of the other Gossoons produced opium and strong spirits. The Burker partook of the latter, but refused the former: his companion however regaled on both: and after a while the whole motley company stretched themselves to sleep on the benches in the inner room.

When the Burker awoke in the morning, he found that himself and his companion were the only two persons remaining in the place: the others had all gone forth on their respective avocations. No breakfast appeared to be forthcoming; and the Gossoon made a sign to the Burker to follow him. As they passed by a shop where comestibles were sold, the Gossoon pointed to the provisions, then to his own mouth and to that of the Burker—as much as to imply that some of that food should presently find its way into those avenues to the stomach. The Burker was cheered by this intimation; and he followed the Gossoon, wondering to what proceedings he was about to address himself in order to procure the means to purchase the inviting provender. Presently the Gossoon halted in a somewhat crowded thoroughfare; and placing his back against a dead wall, he made the Burker stand by his side. Then the Gossoon, taking forth his knife, signalled the Burker to do the same, but to draw off the cork from the point. The Burker, watching the proceedings of his leader, hid the knife up his sleeve; and the Gossoon began to appeal to the charity of the passers-by. At first it was in a whining tone of entreaty; then it was with howls and lamentations; and he kept nudging the Burker to imitate him. This the Englishman did to the best of his endeavour; and several persons—no doubt struck by the novelty of seeing an European in such a condition—stopped for a moment to contemplate him. But his was a countenance little calculated to excite sympathy: the townspeople therefore only shook their heads dubiously, and passed on their way.

The Gossoon, seeing how matters were going, bent a look of rage upon the Burker, as if to reproach him for the failure of their appeal to the public charity. Nothing could exceed the villanous expression of the dervish's countenance as his infuriate feelings thus convulsed his features; and his squinting eye darted forth vivid lightnings. The Burker was actually terrified by his companion's aspect; and he went on howling, yelling, and lamenting more vociferously than ever.

Still however the passers-by seemed incredulous in respect to the claims of the Gossoon and the Burker upon their charity; and thus about a couple of hours elapsed without a single coin being dropped into the outstretched hand of either. That period of the day was approaching when the streets would become deserted on account of the intense sultriness of the sun; and thus there appeared to be little chance, as matters now stood, for the Gossoon and the Burker to obtain the wherewith for the purchase of a breakfast. Yet the Gossoon had a resource left: but it was evidently one to which he only thought fit to address himself as a desperate alternative when the easier and more legitimate means of mendicity failed. He had his knife concealed in his sleeve: the Burker likewise had his weapon hidden up his own arm; and the Gossoon made him a sign to draw it forth. The Burker hesitated,—not understanding the object which the proceeding was to serve: but when he beheld the dervish draw forth his own knife, he followed the example. Then the Gossoon went on howling, roaring, and yelling more terrifically than ever,—the Burker doing his best to play his own part in the appalling chorus. All of a sudden the Gossoon made him a sign to cut himself with his knife; and tearing open his own sleeve, he drew the blade, as if in perfect frenzy, along his arm. The Burker, by no means relishing the frantic example thus set him by the Gossoon, muttered something in his special vernacular to the effect that he would see himself in the hottest place he could possibly think of before he would stick a knife into his own flesh. Quick as lightning, however, the Gossoon tore up the Burker's sleeve, and stuck his knife into the fleshy part of the man's arm. The Burker, roaring with the pain, was on the very point of inflicting summary chastisement on the Gossoon by plunging the knife into his heart,—when a quantity of coins showered down upon them from the windows of the opposite houses. Several of the passers-by, on seeing the blood of the two mendicants thus flowing, quickly bestowed their alms; and thus the Burker's rage was somewhat appeased. The money thrown from the windows was speedily gathered up; and the Gossoon, beckoning the Burker to follow, hurried away.

In a few minutes they stopped in a secluded place; and the Gossoon, producing a small pot of ointment, applied some of it to his own arm, and then to the Burker's. Having done this, he produced bandages likewise; and having made the Burker twist one round his arm, he proceeded to perform the same good office for that individual. The Burker could not however help perceiving that whereas the Gossoon had inflicted upon himself a comparatively trifling scratch, he had dealt far less considerately when plunging his knife into the arm of his comrade. But as the Burker now felt no pain since the application of the ointment, and as the bandage had stanched the blood, he suffered himself to be appeased by the prospect of a good meal—for he was ravenously hungry.

The Gossoon led the way to that comestible shop which they had previously passed; and there he purchased an ample supply of provender. At another shop he procured a quantity of spirits; and thence he conducted the Burker to the khan, or accommodation-house, where they had passed the night. Here several other Gossoons were already assembled, — some devouring the food which they had procured with their morning's mendicity,—others engaged in boiling their rice preparatory for their own meal. It did not however appear that any of them had achieved so much success as the squinting Gossoon and the Burker, judging by the nature and quantity of the provisions that were displayed. While these two were eating and drinking, the other Gossoons laughed and chatted amongst themselves; and the Burker's companion, presently joining in the discourse, soon made all the other Gossoons burst into uproarious peals of laughter. At first the Burker was at a loss to comprehend the cause of this merriment; but when his companion pointed to the man's wounded arm, the latter became terribly irritated; and he bent a diabolically vindictive look on his comrade. The dervish thereupon jumped up from his seat, pointed to the doorway, and made signs to intimate that the Burker was quite at liberty to shift for himself if he thought fit. The Englishman gave a savage growl; and resigning himself to his destiny, went on eating and drinking without taking any further notice of his comrade or the other Gossoons.

CHAPTER CLIX.

TORTURES.

Ten days elapsed, during which the Burker remained in the companionship of the squinting Gossoon; and they wandered from one town to another. They were tolerably successful in their appeals to public charity; and during this interval it was not again found necessary to have recourse to the knives in order to awaken sympathy. The Burker ate and drank of the best: a couple of hours each day were generally sufficient to procure the requisite coin for the purchase of this food; and the houses of public accommodation afforded the wanderers a resting-place for the night. The Burker began to learn a few of the commonest words in the native language of his companion; and he thought that his present kind of life was not so very disagreeable after all.

He soon perceived the motive by which the Gossoon was influenced in making him his companion. It was tolerably evident that public sympathy was pretty well exhausted in respect to the tribe of mendicant dervishes: but the spectacle of an European in apparent distress gave an impulse to flagging charity. The Burker thus comprehended that it was more on his own account than for the Gossoon's sake, that alms poured in upon them: but the dervish himself endeavoured by all kinds of manœuvrings and stratagems to prevent this impression from taking a hold on the Englishman's mind. The Burker was however too shrewd not to fathom the truth; and he accordingly began to think that it would be better for his own interests if he were to dissolve the partnership of mendicity with the Gossoon. His resolution to this effect was taken; and he now only awaited an opportunity to carry it out.

One morning—at the expiration of that interval we have noticed at the beginning of this chapter—the Gossoon and the Burker reached a town of larger dimensions than any of those which they had as yet visited in company; and the dervish gave his comrade to understand that they would here reap a considerable harvest. Scarcely however had they entered the suburbs, when they were seized upon by half-a-dozen Peons, or native policemen, who seemed disposed to handle them roughly. The Gossoon, setting up a hideous howling, drew forth his knife, and was preparing to attack his captors, when he was knocked down by a severe blow; and the weapon was wrested from him. The Burker was then searched; and his knife was likewise taken away: but he escaped any particular ill-treatment on account of offering no resistance. The two prisoners were then conducted hurriedly along the streets; and they were thus led to a large gloomy-looking building, which the Burker fancied to be a prison. It however proved to be no house of permanent detention at all: for the building contained one large room—and though not a gaol, it was nevertheless a scene of terrific horrors.

There were about twenty persons seated upon a long bench against one of the walls of this room, the door of which was guarded by several Peons. The Burker and the Gossoon were conducted to the bench; and there they sat down amidst the other captives. With the exception of the Burker himself, all these prisoners were natives, belonging to different castes; and there were several females amongst them. These were weeping bitterly, while several of the men were howling, yelling, and wailing, all as if in anticipation of some terrible chastisement which they would shortly have to endure. There were however three or four men, evidently of a somewhat superior class, who maintained a dignified silence, and who had the air of innocent victims courageously resigning themselves to the pressure of some strong tyranny against which there was no appeal.

Upon a table in the middle of the room lay several articles of a miscellaneous character. There were whips and sticks, necklaces made of bones, hammers and nails, several brickbats, small iron rods with wooden handles, coils of rope, cocoa-nut shells, and little boxes the contents of which the Burker could not conjecture. As he glanced along the line of captives upon the bench, he perceived that many of them kept flinging frighted and shuddering glances towards this table; so that at length the idea stole into the man's mind that the punishment to be expected was associated with the objects so ominously spread upon that board.

Presently a superior officer of the Peons entered the room; and he made an imperious sign for the howlings, the lamentations, and the wailings to be hushed. To a certain extent he was obeyed: for the captives doubtless thought that their punishment would be meted—or rather mitigated, according to the degree of submissiveness they displayed. Some of the women however continued to weep with a bitterness which they were evidently unable to restrain.

The suspenseful curiosity of the Burker was at length about to be assuaged—but in a manner as horrible as if when suffering from a burning thirst, the most noxious fluid was poured down his throat. A couple of the Peons seized upon the Burker's comrade; and the wretched Gossoon began to address them in a strain of the most piteous appeal. To these entreaties however they were not merely inaccessible, but with their clenched fists they dealt him some severe blows over the head in order to compel him to hold his peace. They then stretched him upon the floor; and one of the Peons proceeded to administer a terrible fustigation with a large whip which he took from the table. The Gossoon howled hideously: but the more he yelled, the heavier fell the blows, —until at length the Peon desisted from sheer exhaustion. The Gossoon was then lifted up and forcibly expelled from the place.

One of the dignified-looking natives was now seized upon; and in silence did he submit to the torture he was about to undergo. In the first place the Peons twisted his ears with most merciless brutality; and though the victim writhed with the pain, yet did not a sound escape his lips. He was then made to kneel upon the floor; and a brick was placed in the bend of each leg, just within the knee-joint. A cord was then fastened round his waist; the extremities were fixed to his ankles; and his form was thus drawn down until the haunches rested upon the heels. When it is remembered that the bricks were inserted behind the knee-joints, the excruciating agony of this position can be fully comprehended. There the man was left in the middle of the room; and another victim was now seized upon. This was also one of the dignified individuals who had maintained a profound silence; and the Peons, taking a couple of the sticks from the table, tied them together at one end. The man's hands were now introduced between the two sticks—which were tightened over them and made to cross each other at the unfastened ends; so that the compression upon the hands was productive of a most hideous torture. The unfortunate victim bore it heroically, and in silence, for some minutes—until at length a low moan escaped his lips, and he sank down senseless. A couple of the females were now seized upon by the Peons; and despite their piteous entreaties, the barbaric torture was applied. Their hands were likewise crushed between a couple of sticks; and this process, we may observe, is known in India by the name of the *kittee*. The piercing screams of the victims thrilled through the apartment; and when they seemed about to faint with excess of agony, the sticks were removed from their hands. But their punishment was not over; for the Peons proceeded to tie the two females together by the long tresses of their back hair. With ruthless hands did the torturers fasten those knots so tightly as to cause the most terrible pain to the victims; and thus united, they were left, sitting back to back, on the floor.

There was an elderly female, well-dressed, and of most respectable appearance, who was seated in the midst of the captives on the bench. One of the Peons now approached her—threw over her neck a chain made of bones—and spat in her face; while another Peon took a stick and dealt her several severe blows over the shoulders. They then left her with the chain of bones round her neck—this punishment being one of the most degrading and derogatory that could be possibly inflicted on a native female of a respectable caste.

Another male victim was now seized upon; and to him was applied the torture known as the *anundal*. Being placed against the wall, he was compelled to stand upon one leg; and a cord being fastened round his neck, the extremity was tied by means of a thin string to the great toe of the upraised leg; and in this condition the wretched being was left. Another male victim was thrown upon the floor; a cord was likewise fastened round his neck; and the extremities were tied to his feet, —the head being drawn down till it rested on the knees. Then a large stone was placed upon his back; and in this position he also was left. A cord was now passed through a pulley attached to the ceiling: one extremity was fastened to the long flowing hair of a female; and the other was tied to a ring in the wall—the cord being drawn just so tight as to compel the miserable victim to remain standing on the points of her toes. Next a brazier was brought in: some of the iron rods were placed in the burning charcoal; and when red hot, these searing irons were applied to the bare arms or legs of other victims.

But now a still more exquisite process of torture was about to meet the horrified view of the Burker. A handsome young woman was to become its victim; and heartrending were her shrieks when by the preparations she comprehended what she had to endure. Being compelled to kneel upon the ground, she was stripped to the waist; and when her natural modesty prompted her to cross her arms over her bosom, the Peons brutally drew those arms away, and fastened them by the wrists behind her back. A Peon then took up the half of a cocoa-nut shell; and opening one of the little boxes upon the table, he dexterously shifted into that shell several insects which the box contained. These insects were of the species known as the carpenter-beetle, which are accustomed to bite with a stinging sensation infinitely more severe than the pain inflicted by an English wasp. Amidst the rending shrieks of the unfortunate young woman, the cocoa-nut shell was applied to one of her breasts, a Peon holding it there, and two others of these miscreant torturers holding the victim herself so tightly and steadily as to prevent her from shaking off the shell by the convulsions of her excruciated form. Her screams were horrible to a degree; and it was not until she fainted that the torture was considered sufficient.

A beautiful young woman was the next victim. She was most respectably attired: her bearing in every sense indicated her to be a female of unimpeachable modesty; and in addition to a handsome countenance, she possessed a perfect symmetry of shape. When the executioners approached her, she threw herself upon her knees, stretching forth her clasped hands in agonizing appeal—but all in vain. She was stretched upon the bench, and a cloth was stuffed into her mouth to drown her cries. The Peons, ruthlessly tearing off her garments, stripped her to the waist; and a magnificent bust was then revealed. It was no doubt on account of the superb contours of her bosom, she was chosen for the particular torture which was now to be adopted. Firm, rounded, and admirably shaped, as if it were of statuary marble, was this young female's bust; and to each bosom was the *kittee* applied. The sticks, fastened two and two at each extremity, and formed of a wood just sufficiently supple to inflict the torture without breaking, were made to encircle and tighten round each breast as if securing those glowing orbs in a vice. The agony was terrific—and all the more so inasmuch as there was no vent for it through the portals of the lips,—the suffocating cloth hushing the shrieks and screams that must have arisen as it were up into the very throat. The compressure of the bosom between the accursed sticks was continued with unrelenting ferocity, until the torturers fancied that the victim had fainted: but life itself was extinct. She was a corpse! There however the wretches let her lie.

Several other species of torture were next administered to other victims. One was fastened to the wall, with a nail driven through his ear, in such a manner that he was compelled to keep standing upon the points of his toes. A donkey was led into the room; and the hair of another victim was tied to the animal's tail. The brute was then lashed with a whip; and it dragged the man rapidly through the open door into the streets,—his cries and yells of agony reverberating through the place. At length every one of the captives had undergone some species of horrible chastisement, with the exception of the Burker. For nearly three hours had the proceedings now lasted; and the wretch had been compelled to sit gazing upon the sufferings of his fellow-prisoners. Every instant he had shudderingly wondered when his turn would come, and which special torture would be allotted to himself. It seemed however as if there were an intention either to reserve him to the last, or to pass him over altogether: and the man earnestly hoped that this latter alternative would prove to be the case.

The officer of the Peons now approached him, saying in tolerably good English, "You are an European?—perhaps an Englishman?"

The Burker replied in the affirmative, and besought mercy.

"Take yourself off, then!" responded the officer; "and beware how you are again found in the company of any of those lazy vagabond impostors who prowl about the country and impose upon the charitable. Depart!"

The Burker did not require to be again bidden to quit that scene of horrors; and he hastened away.

We must here pause to assure the reader that we have dealt not in the slightest exaggeration while endeavouring to describe the process of diabolical tortures to which the natives of India are not merely liable, but to which they are often subjected. Perhaps it may be supposed that scenes of this description occur only in the domains of independent Princes: but the very reverse is the fact, —for they occur *only* in that part of India which groans beneath the tyranny of British rule. The object is to enforce the payment of the oppressive taxes which the Anglo-Indian Government levies upon the native population,—chiefly upon the landowners. India swarms with the collectors: and these harpies possess power to punish defaulters. The collectors themselves are for the most part of unprincipled character; and they conceal their own peculations, or administer to their extravagances, by compelling the natives to pay the same tax two or three times over. If a landowner should oppose their tyranny, he is seized upon and tortured: or if he hide himself, or undertake a journey in order to escape the importunity of the collector when visiting his district, his wife or his daughter may be rendered a victim in his place,—as was the case with those females whose sufferings we have just described. Moreover, in many towns of Anglo-India, mendicants and vagrants are subjected to the torture; and the license to use it being accorded to the local authorities, is frightfully abused. If a tax-collector or an officer of Peons should chance to cast his eyes upon a handsome female, woe to her unless she surrender herself into the miscreant's arms! It is no vain threat which he holds forth to take her to the torture-chamber; and he will ruthlessly stand by to contemplate the maiming or mutilation, the crushing or the laceration of the charms which in the first instance fired his passion.

Yes — reader, torture exists in India under British rule! — torture is inflicted by the officials of the Anglo-Indian Government! Countless sums are subscribed annually at Exeter Hall and elsewhere to furnish the means for missionaries to carry the Gospel amongst the "benighted heathens and pagans" of that Oriental clime: but who of those missionaries has ever returned to England to raise an indignant voice against the infliction of the torture upon the poor Hindoos? A pretty opinion must those unfortunates have of the nation to which belong the missionaries who would convert them; and a fine notion must they entertain of that religion which seeks to proselytise them. Of the full amount of horrors committed by British rule in Hindostan, the masses of our people have but a faint idea: but we solemnly assure them that no single detail of the above given description of the torture-chamber in India is in any way exaggerated.

We now resume the thread of our narrative. The Burker, on emerging from the midst of that scene of horrors, sped through the streets, anxious to escape as soon as possible from a town where vagrancy was so frightfully punished. He beheld not the Gossoon—nor did he indeed take any trouble to look for him: he was glad to have got rid of such a dangerous companionship. Issuing from the town in the contrary direction from that by which he had entered it, the Burker proceeded at random across the open country, until the sultriness of the sun at length compelled him to seek the refreshing shade of some trees: for since quitting the jungle he experienced no apprehension on reposing himself beneath such umbrageous canopies. He soon fell fast asleep: his slumber lasted for several hours; and when he awoke, it was with a gnawing sensation of hunger in his stomach.

But, Ah! who was this that was seated on the grass near him? It was his late companion, the squint-eyed Gossoon, who appeared to have been patiently waiting until the Burker should arouse himself. For a moment an expression of annoyance passed over the Englishman's features: but his looks as well as his mood speedily changed when the Gossoon emptied upon the grass the contents of his wallet. The fare thus furnished was good; and the Gossoon grinned with a malicious triumph as he perceived the aspect of vexation flit away from the Burker's countenance. They both commenced an attack upon the provender, which they washed down with a quantity of spirits from the flask that the wallet likewise contained.

When the meal was over, the Gossoon made dolorous signs to indicate the sufferings he had endured in the torture-chamber; and he seemed anxious to know with what nature and degree of punishment the Burker himself had got off. The Englishman quickly gave him to understand that he had escaped scot free: whereat the Gossoon regarded him with the most unfeigned astonishment. Recourse being had once more to the contents of the flask, the Gossoon made a sign that they should continue their way. The Burker could not help keeping in the man's company again, at least for the present: but he nevertheless resolved to separate from him as soon as possible; for the warning of the officer of the Peons rang in his ears, and the spectacle of the torture-chamber was vividly present to his memory. He had ascertained beyond the possibility of doubt, from the presence of those Peons at the town he had so recently left, that he was now upon the soil of the British possessions; and he was therefore relieved from the dread of being apprehended by any of Queen Indora's emissaries.

The Gossoon and the Burker continued their way until the sun was low in the western horizon; and the Englishman, being well wearied, made a sign to his companion that they must soon think of finding a place for repose. The Gossoon himself was much fatigued; and he seemed uncertain which direction to take. He stopped and looked about him,—until at length descrying a house at a distance, he pointed thither. Towards that house the two men accordingly proceeded; and as they drew near the dwelling, the Burker saw that it was a farm-house. On reaching it, the Gossoon did not immediately proceed to the front door: but a side window being open, he peeped in. The Burker looked over his shoulder: and they both beheld an elderly man—a Hindoo native of the Ryot or land-holding class, counting his money at a table. He was alone in that room; and so intent was he in the counting of his rupees, that he evidently suspected not the presence of the witnesses at the window. The Gossoon flung upon the Burker a look of mysterious significancy, which the latter could not rightly comprehend; and then the dervish hastily led his English companion towards the front door.

There the Gossoon commenced the usual whine with which persons of his profession solicit charity in India; and in a few moments the elderly Ryot made his appearance. Nothing could exceed the fawning humility of the Gossoon's demeanour,—which the Burker imitated as well as he could. The Ryot was astonished to see an European in the vagrant companionship of a dervish; and the Gossoon immediately proceeded to give voluble utterance to some tale, of which the Burker was evidently the hero. That this tale was replete with woes and sufferings, as well as injuries and wrongs sustained, was likewise evident: for the elderly Ryot contemplated the Burker with an increasing degree of interest; and when the Gossoon had ceased speaking, the hospitable master of the homestead invited them both to enter. He set food before them: they ate and drank; and when they had finished their meal, the Ryot conducted them to a little back room where he meant them to repose for the night.

The sun had by this time set, and the room was involved in almost complete darkness: but scarcely had the hospitable Ryot retired, when the Gossoon nudged the Burker and gave him to understand that he was not to go to sleep. It now occurred to the Englishman that the Gossoon was contemplating some bold or stealthy step in respect to the Ryot's money: for he remembered the significant look which the dervish had bent upon him ere they had retired from the window of the landowner's private room. In a few minutes they heard the front door of the house open; and then there were the sounds of three or four voices in conversation together in a neighbouring apartment. It was evident that some of the Ryot's family, or else his domestics, had returned from their occupations on the farm. The Burker was wondering whether this circumstance would alter the Gossoon's plan, whatever it were,—when that individual gave him another significant nudge; so that the Englishman felt convinced his comrade entertained his original intention.

They sat in silence in their little room for about an hour and a half,—when they heard footsteps moving about the house, followed by the closing of different doors; so that they knew the family was retiring to rest. Another hour passed in total silence,—the Gossoon however occasionally nudging his companion, as if to bid him keep awake. At length the dervish seemed to think the moment was come for the execution of his project; and he slowly opened the door. There was a passage with which other rooms communicated; and sufficient light streamed through a small window to show the two men where the doors of those apartments were situated. The Gossoon comprehended the geography of the place better than the Burker; and he proceeded slowly and cautiously to open a door on the left hand side of the passage. There also the light streamed in from the starlit heavens; and the Gossoon, having first looked carefully into the chamber, beckoned the Burker to follow him. The hospitable Ryot was sleeping there. The Gossoon crept towards the couch; and just as he reached it, the Ryot started up. But the Gossoon flew at him as if he had for the nonce borrowed a tiger's power and agility; and his hands clutched the unfortunate man's throat. No cry escaped the Ryot's lips—no sound but a suffocating gasping gurgle: but for an instant there was a violent struggle between the two, until the Burker threw himself upon the Ryot's form and held him down. The horrible process of murder lasted not then many minutes. The deed was accomplished: the individual who had afforded such generous hospitality to the two miscreants, lay a corpse in his bed. The Gossoon had proved himself as ruthless and merciless an assassin as even the Burker was in his own native clime!

When the tragedy was accomplished, the two men listened for a few moments: but all was silent. They then began ransacking the furniture and boxes in the room; and after some little difficulty they discovered the place where their victim had concealed his hoarded rupees. These were contained in two bags, which seemed to be of tolerably equal weight and dimensions: the Gossoon accordingly took one—the Burker the other. They then issued from the chamber of death by means of that window through which they had first become acquainted with the fact that the Ryot possessed the coin that proved the temptation to commit this heinous crime.

But it seemed as if the Gossoon were not contented with what he had done: or at all events he thought that another crime must be perpetrated to conceal the first one. There was an immense quantity of rice-straw in the immediate vicinity of the dwelling; and by the means of ignition which the Gossoon always carried about with him, he set fire to the stack. The flame blazed up,—almost immediately seizing upon the house itself, which was built of combustible materials; and away sped the incendiary, closely followed by the Burker. The latter could not help thinking that the crime was a bold one altogether, though he had no remorse on its account; but he fancied that if the other inmates of the house should escape from the conflagration, the murder and the robbery might possibly be discovered; and they could scarcely fail to know that the Ryot had awarded his hospitality to two men who would be missing. However, the triple turpitude of murder, robbery, and arson was consummated: it was too late to recall either of the foul deeds; and the Burker thought within himself that the Gossoon must have had excellent reasons for superadding the last crime to the two former.

On they went together, and every now and then as they looked back, they beheld the tremendous conflagration; but the Burker could distinguish no persons moving about in the vicinage of the flames. At length a grove hid the burning scene from the view of the criminals; and they reached a cave, where they passed the remainder of the night. At dawn they resumed their journey; and the Gossoon was now careful to avoid towns or large villages. They procured refreshments at isolated cottages, either through charity or by paying for their food; but they were equally careful not to display the large sums of money which they possessed.

Ten days passed after the terrible crimes which we have just recorded; and many a long mile had the criminals journeyed together, thus continuously increasing the interval between themselves and the scene of their turpitude. At length the Gossoon evidently thought that they were completely safe; and they entered a small town which they now reached. Here they purchased a quantity of excellent provisions; and some article which they thus bought, was wrapped up by the shopkeeper in a piece of a newspaper. On reaching the khan, where they purposed to pass the night, the Burker happening to look at the fragment of newspaper, discovered that it was printed in the English language. It was one of the small local journals which are issued in that tongue in India. While eating his supper, the Burker looked over its contents,—until his attention was riveted to a paragraph, headed "Terrible fire and loss of life."

He read the paragraph; and he found that it related to the very deed of blackest turpitude which himself and the Gossoon had perpetrated. It appeared (according to the journal) that every soul in the house had perished in the flames, which had spread with such rapidity that there was no possibility of escape. A wandering Gossoon and some European of a very low description were reported to have perished at the same time,—the particulars of the conflagration having been furnished by two labouring men who had partaken of supper at the house, but had afterwards quitted it to retire to the cottage which they inhabited at a little distance. The Burker now comprehended why the Gossoon had set fire to the premises. With a devilish shrewdness he had foreseen this catastrophe: or at all events he had thought it was worth while to perpetrate this last crime with the chance that it would conceal the previous ones.

The Englishman pointed to the newspaper; and partly by signs, partly by aid of the few words of Hindostanee he had picked up, he made the dervish comprehend the nature of its contents. A diabolical satisfaction was expressed on the Hindoo's countenance; and the Burker could not help regarding the Gossoon as a villain endowed with a boldness and a shrewdness well calculated to win any other villain's admiration.

The meal of which they partook was a copious one; and they washed it down with proportionate quantities of alcoholic fluid. It happened that they were alone together in the khan; and they were likewise alone when they lay down to rest. The Burker was more than half intoxicated with the liquor he had imbibed; and he slept most soundly. The sun had risen some time when he awoke; and he immediately missed the Gossoon. An idea of treachery flashed through his brain: he thrust his hands beneath his garments; and a terrible imprecation burst from his lips as he discovered that his bag of money was gone. He looked about him in the last wild faint hope that it might have slipped out from his buttoned-up coat while he was slumbering: but no—it had vanished! Nothing could exceed the rage of the Burker. It was only the night before that he had resolved upon playing the Gossoon precisely the same trick: but he was foiled—he was baffled—he was forestalled. Oh! if he could only fall in with the squinting villain, what a terrible vengeance would he wreak upon him! From the very first moment he met that Gossoon at the cave in the jungle, he had hated him: he had continued to hate him throughout the three weeks of their wandering companionship; and now this hatred expanded into a craving for the direst vengeance.

CHAPTER CLX.

THE RUINED TEMPLE.

ONCE more did the Burker find himself a moneyless outcast in a strange land. He had not even a morsel of food to put between his lips; for the Gossoon had carried off the wallet which contained the remnant of the provender purchased on the preceding evening. Hungry and miserable—almost as desponding and as despairing as he had ever been even when in the depths of the hideous jungle—the Englishman went forth from the khan. He had some idea of playing the part of howling mendicant by himself: but beholding a couple of Peons proceeding through the street, he thought of the tortures—and he quitted the town.

For several hours he wandered through the country, reckless in which direction he proceeded—having no fixed aim—but wondering what would become of himself. At length he reached a pile of ruins, which seemed to be the remains of some ancient temple. He remembered the ruined temple he had seen in the jungle; and his blood ran cold at the recollection of how he had there beheld snakes coiling all over the black marble image. He therefore hesitated to enter amidst these ruins,—although the beams of the meridian sun were pouring down with all their burning heat upon him. He was faint and exhausted with hunger, with weariness, and with the intolerable sultriness of the day: he therefore at last mustered up courage sufficient to penetrate into the ruins.

Amidst huge blocks of granite did the Englishman work his way—over prostrate pillars and crumbling columns did he step—until he at length found himself inside as much as remained of the edifice itself. He perceived one large image upon a pedestal, and another lying amidst the rank grass which grew where a pavement of stone or marble once had been.

As he was proceeding cautiously, the Burker's foot kicked against something amidst the grass; and it being of a very hard substance, he had no fear that it was any coiled-up reptile. He stooped down, and felt about upon the spot:—his hand encountered an iron ring fastened to the middle of a stone about two feet square. Thinking that the circumstance was worth while to be further investigated—and having ideas of buried treasures floating through his mind—the Englishman began to remove the long grass which grew all about the stone; and when he had torn up the rank herbage by the roots, he found that the stone was set in the midst of surrounding pavement, upon which a surface of earth had accumulated sufficient to produce and nourish the grass which he had thus cleared. He now endeavoured to raise the stone: but vain were his attempts. Exhausted thereby, he desisted—and began to console himself for his failure in a fashion somewhat similar to that of the fox with respect to the grapes in the fable. He muttered between his lips that the stone with the ring doubtless covered the mouth of a well, and that any idea of a buried treasure was idle and ridiculous.

The exceeding sultriness of the sun compelled the Burker to remain within the shade afforded by the ruined temple. He was faint with hunger and parched with thirst: he resolved at the approach of evening to quit his present quarters, and appeal to the charity of some dweller at any neighbouring cottage for food and a night's rest. Perhaps through the man's mind floated the idea of enriching himself once more by means similar to those which had temporarily put him in possession of a bag of rupees: for crime is horribly suggestive, even on the part of those who by their own misdeeds would appear to stand in need of no such hints at all.

In a short time the thirst of the Burker grew so intolerable that he was compelled to issue forth from the ruined temple in the hope of finding some neighbouring spring. But scarcely had he advanced a dozen yards from the dilapidated edifice, when he beheld the unmistakable form of the squint-eyed Gossoon approaching. It was with a sudden yell of rage that the Burker bounded towards his late companion: but the latter, with a malignant grin, drew forth a sharp poniard from beneath his garments; and holding its point towards the Burker, seemed to say, "Come on if you dare!"

The Englishman stopped short, scowling horribly: the Gossoon burst out into a laugh, which only irritated the Englishman more than ever, if possible, against him; so that at all risks he was on the very point of springing at the treacherous dervish, when this individual suddenly tossed his wallet towards him. The Burker picked it up; and as he opened it, his hand first of all encountered a flask. This he at once applied to his lips; and the potent alcohol he imbibed tended to appease his rage somewhat and improve his humour. He glanced at the Gossoon, who was now grinning, nodding, and wagging his head, and squinting more horribly than ever with his right eye.

The wallet contained some tempting provisions; and the Burker was already commencing a ravenous attack upon them, when the Gossoon spoke something and made him a sign to repair to the ruins of the temple. The Burker hesitated and looked suspicious: but the Hindoo replaced his dagger beneath his garments, and made signs of amity and peace. The Burker thought that after all the Gossoon could entertain no murderous intention towards him; for if so, he might have already carried it into effect while he was inspecting the wallet; and therefore he no longer hesitated to return into the temple. There they sat down together, eating and drinking just as if their companionship had never once been interrupted by the perfidy of the Hindoo; and when the meal was concluded, the Gossoon rose and began to examine the interior of the ruins, evidently with the air of a man who beheld them for the first time. The Burker meanwhile was wondering whether his companion still had the bags of rupees about him; and if so, how he could turn the tables and become the despoiler. All of a sudden an ejaculation escaped the lips of the dervish:—he had discovered the stone with the iron ring!

The Burker now approached the spot; and partly by signs, partly by means of the few words of Hindostanee with which he was acquainted, he gave the Gossoon to understand that it was he himself who had torn up the grass, but that he had vainly endeavoured to lift the stone. The Gossoon attempted the task; but appeared equally unable to perform it. He then took his dagger, and with the point endeavoured to work away the cement which united the stone to the surrounding ones. While he was thus occupied, an idea entered into the Burker's head. He thought that he might seize the opportunity of gratifying his vengeance, and recovering possession of his bag of rupees, with the Gossoon's treasure likewise, all at the same time. His eye settled upon a fragment of masonry which lay conveniently near, and which was of dimensions suitable to be wielded for his murderous purpose,—when the Gossoon, suddenly starting up from the work in

which he had been engaged, bent upon the Englishman a ferocious look, as if by some extraordinary intuition he had read what was passing in his mind. The Burker scowled in order to veil his confusion; for he recollected that the Gossoon had in every sense the advantage of him—being armed with a weapon, and being physically stronger, as he had proven at the cave in the jungle.

All in a moment the Hindoo's appearance changed: he smiled and nodded in the most amicable manner, giving utterance to words which the Burker comprehended were to the effect that they should thenceforth be friends again. He drew forth the stolen bag of rupees from amidst his garments, and tossed the treasure to the Burker. This was a proof of amicable intentions; and the Englishman was rejoiced to regain possession of his portion of the wealth that had been procured by a share in the crime. It struck him that the Gossoon entertained the hope that he stood upon the threshold of some important discovery in respect to the stone with the ring—and that he felt he could not well act without the assistance or the services of the Burker—and hence his change of demeanour towards him. Again did ideas of a buried treasure troop through the Englishman's mind; and willing to enter into a renewed partnership with the Gossoon, he proffered his hand. The Hindoo took it: the flask was produced from the wallet; and they appeared to vow mutual friendship, each in a dram of the potent spirits.

The Gossoon, now abandoning the process of picking away the mortar—which seemed an interminable one, for it was nearly as hard as the stones which it cemented together—examined the ring with a scrutinizing attention. Presently he began to work the ring about in different ways, and to endeavour to turn it round. In this he at length succeeded; and with but little difficulty he moved the stone—or rather, we should say, not merely the one which contained the ring, but the surrounding smaller ones to which it was joined. Instead of opening like a trap-door, the mass of masonry rolled aside, disclosing an aperture large enough for a stout person to pass through. An ejaculation of joy burst from the Gossoon's lips; and the Burker was now full of excited curiosity and suspense.

The stone covering of the aperture was fixed by rings, on its underneath part, to two iron bars running horizontal and parallel three or four inches below the aperture; so that the masonry could not be raised, but it slid with comparative ease sideways, when the spring which retained it fast was acted upon by the turning of the iron ring. There was a flight of stone steps leading down into utter darkness: nor was it possible to conjecture to what depth the abyss descended. The Gossoon collected together a quantity of dry branches and leaves from some trees in the immediate vicinage of the temple; and making a loose faggot, he set fire to these combustible materials. He threw the blazing torch into the subterranean; and the glare was sufficient to show that it was a room, or cavern, of about ten feet in depth, to which the steps led down.

The Gossoon rubbed his hands, laughed gleefully, and gave every evidence of his conviction that some discovery most important to himself and his companion was about to be made. He then proceeded to manufacture three or four torches; and when this task was accomplished, he signalled the Burker to descend into the cavern for the purposes of research. But the Englishman, terribly suspicious of perfidy, shook his head, and intimated that it was the Gossoon who ought to be the first to descend. The Hindoo, thinking that his companion required some fresh proof of his sincerity towards him, drew forth his poignard, snapped the blade in halves, and tossed the fragments amidst the ruins. The Burker now thought that he need no longer hesitate: but still he made a sign for the Gossoon to follow him. The Hindoo assented: two torches were lighted; and the Burker, carrying one, began the descent of the stone steps. The Hindoo, carrying the other, was close behind him.

They found themselves, as they expected, in a small room of about the depth which we have already specified; and it was probably eight feet square, by six in width. Along one of the walls several small vases were ranged; and on the lids of these being lifted off, they were found to be filled with coins, but so discoloured as to afford the idea at first that they were all of copper or even of a baser metal. But the dervish, with another ejaculation of joy, rang a few of them on the paved floor, bit them with his teeth, and proved them to be silver. He then danced in the gleefulness of his mood; and the Burker was likewise so overjoyed that he forgot all his past enmity and hatred towards the man through whose instrumentality this colossal treasure was discovered.

Some minutes elapsed before the Gossoon could so far regain his composure as to reflect upon the course which was next to be adopted. Nor did it appear as if he were very well able to make up his mind in a hurry: for he signalled to the Burker that they should quit the cavern for the present. The Englishman now once again abandoned himself to the guidance of the Gossoon; and he offered no objection when that individual began to lead the way up the stone steps. They had each lighted a second torch: but these were already burnt so low as to last but for a minute or two longer.

The Gossoon, as we have said, began to lead the way up the steps, the Burker following. But all in a moment it struck the latter that the Hindoo was hastening up with a suspicious quickness; and an idea of treachery flashed through the Englishman's mind. The Gossoon sprang out of the aperture; and the next instant the Burker, to his horror, beheld the masonry gliding over him. With a cry, or rather yell, at the hideous thought of being buried alive in that tomb, he thrust up his right hand, which held the fragment of the blazing torch; and it came in contact with the Gossoon's hand, which was upon the ring of the central stone. A howl of agony burst from the Hindoo as the blazing faggot broke all over his flesh: his hand quitted its hold on the ring: the Burker rolled back the masonry, and leaped forth from the subterranean.

Now these two men stood facing each other with aspects of fierce and malignant *defiance*. The Gossoon's treachery was but too well understood by the Burker; for the perfidious Hindoo had intended to accomplish his death by starvation or suffocation in the subterranean, so that he might possess himself of the whole of the treasure. The Burker could no more repose the slightest confidence in him: the Gossoon evidently felt this; and thus the two men stood confronting each other, as if with the mutual conviction that one must now die in order for the survivor to be safe. Both were unarmed, and each seemed fearful of commencing the attack. The Gossoon had not the same confidence in himself as when he suddenly pounced upon the Burker and hurled him down at the cave in the jungle. Perhaps he knew that he had then merely taken him by surprise, and that by sheer agility he had performed a feat for a repetition of which he could not hope, now that his opponent stood entirely upon his guard. On the other hand the Englishman was equally reluctant to be the first to close in the death-struggle, for fear lest the Gossoon should have some fresh manœuvre or practise some artifice for which he was unprepared. They were like two wild beasts, determined upon an encounter—whose ferocious instincts could not be otherwise appeased—yet neither daring to commence the attack—each waiting to take the other at disadvantage—their eyes glaring—their forms quivering, with every muscle and tendon vibrating under the influence of terrific excitement and suspense.

At length, with characteristic desperation, the Burker sprang at his foe, whom he endeavoured to clutch by the throat: but the Gossoon to a certain extent avoiding the attack, seized the Burker round the waist and hurled him to the ground—thus repeating the feat which he had performed at the cave in the jungle. The Englishman however held fast to his opponent; and amidst the grass did they struggle in the immediate vicinage of the mouth of the subterranean. All in a moment there was the sharp, quick, ominous hiss of a deadly reptile; and a cobra, uprearing its hooded head, darted at the face of the Gossoon, who was uppermost at the instant, his hands clutching the Burker's clothes, and the Burker retaining him likewise in his powerful grasp. The Burker instantaneously sprang up to his feet, horrified and dismayed, a cold perspiration breaking out all over him; while the Gossoon, with an anguished yell, likewise started up, the cobra having bitten him on the cheek. Quick as lightning the half-maddened dervish snatched up a stone, and hurled it at the serpent as it was gliding again amidst the grass. The reptile was stricken just behind its hooded head; and it continued to writhe beneath the stone which held it firmly down to the earth. Making a piteous sign to the Burker to leave him unmolested, the Gossoon hastily gathered some herbs, which he selected from amongst the grass; and putting them into his mouth, he began to chew them,—his whole frame quivering with the nervous excitement and suspense of his feelings. For a few minutes the Burker looked on, he himself being scarcely able to shake off the horrifying sensation which had seized upon him at this terrific interruption of the struggle with the Gossoon: but as he gradually collected his ideas, he began to deliberate on the course which he should pursue. The Gossoon, having chewed the herbs into a poultice, applied it to his cheek with one hand—while with the other he made deprecating signs to the Burker, evidently entreating him to let him have this one last chance of life, and that under existing circumstances all personal hostility should be suspended. But the Englishman was already reflecting that if the medicinal properties of the herbs should neutralize the venom of the snake-bite—in short, if the Gossoon should continue to enjoy a hale and vigorous life—they would stand towards each other in precisely the same position as before. They would have the same feeling that the security of the one could only be guaranteed by the death of the other — for they were mutually suspicious,—the Burker especially could no longer trust the Gossoon,—and the latter had moreover given him a suggestion, to the effect that the treasure might as well be possessed by one as by both.

Thus was it that the Burker came to the conclusion that it were ridiculous to lose the present opportunity, and to suffer the Gossoon to obtain an advantage over him. He therefore all in a moment darted back a few yards, caught up a huge stone in both his hands, and hurled it at the Hindoo. The latter beheld the movement and started aside: but that movement was too rapid to fail altogether in its effect; and the stone, instead of striking the head of the dervish, smote him on the shoulder. Down he fell, sending forth a howl that reverberated through the ruins: but the Burker suffered not an instant to elapse ere he repeated the assault. Another stone was flung—this time with better effect: it struck the Gossoon upon the head. The crashing of his skull would have sounded horrible upon the ears of any other person but the Burker, who remorselessly hastened to despatch his victim.

Thus was the Burker rid of the Gossoon—the man who had been his companion—in some sense his friend—but chiefly an enemy. Sole master of the treasure was the Burker now: but how could he render it available? He had no means of conveyance for such a quantity of jars; and if he were to load himself with the coin, he could bear but comparatively a small portion of it away with him. He must have time to reflect. But he remembered that if any of the inhabitants, or authorities of the district, or any wayfarers should happen to find him amongst those ruins with a corpse, it would be instantaneously supposed that he had committed a foul murder, without provocation, and without the faintest shadow of excuse for the crime. He therefore resolved to conceal the dead body; and having rifled it, he dragged it to the extremity of the ruins, where he covered it with fragments of the dilapidated masonry. When this was done, the Burker sat down upon a mass of granite to think of the course which he should now pursue. To remove the treasure without a vehicle, was impossible: to obtain one without exciting suspicion of some sort or another, seemed equally impracticable for a person situated as he was. True, he had a quantity of money about him, his own bag of rupees, and the Gossoon's likewise; for he had taken this from about the person of the corpse:—but his wretched apparel, his ill-looks, and his suspicious appearance would inevitably bring him into trouble if he were to proceed to any house and exhibit sufficient coin for the hire or purchase of a cart. Then, what was he to do? The only plan appeared to be the first which he had thought of—namely, that of securing about his person as much of the treasure as possible, and taking his departure from that spot.

Having made up his mind to the pursuance of this course, the Burker proceeded to manufacture a couple of torches similar to those which he had just now seen the Gossoon make; and inasmuch as from the rifled garments of the corpse he had procured the materials for striking a light, he prepared for another descent into the subterranean. The sliding trap-door of masonry was opened; and, having lighted one of his torches, the Burker descended the steps. But not many moments had he been in the cavern, when he was startled by hearing a sort of subdued growl somewhere within the ruins. He thought that it must be fancy—or at least endeavoured to persuade himself that it was: but the sound was repeated—and it was accompanied by a slight rustling of the long grass where it was not cleared away. For a few instants the Englishman was so paralysed by mortal terror as to be unable to take any decisive step, until suspense grew horrible beyond all endurance; and then, with a torch still burning in his hand, he began to ascend the steps. With exceeding caution—shuddering from head to foot—and horribly alarmed lest some wild animal should spring at him, the Burker thus raised himself up until his eyes could just look over the level of the aperture. Then a fierce growl saluted his ears, instantaneously followed by a second sound which may be described as a savage howl of affright; and he beheld a huge tiger retreating slowly, evidently in alarm at the light of the torch. The Burker was so smitten with consternation that he nearly fell down the steps: but suddenly recovering his presence of mind, he closed the trap-door, all except about an inch; and he left it thus far open for two reasons. The first was that the spring might not be so acted upon as to prevent him from opening the trap-door again from within the cavern; and the other was that he might not altogether shut out the air necessary for life. So horribly bewildered however were the wretched man's thoughts, that it struck him not at the instant that the first reason was alone sufficient as a motive for leaving the trap-door partially unclosed, without the adjunctive of the second. Yet both ideas had flashed to his mind at the same instant; and even in the hideous turmoil of his thoughts they had suggested that precautionary measure.

He now lost no time in lighting the second torch—for the first was nearly extinct; and he shrank from the idea of being left in the dark in that subterranean. He heard the stealthy cat-like paces of the tiger returning to the trap-door which covered the aperture of the cavern; and his blood congealed with horror lest the monster should be by any means enabled to get at him. Next he heard the tiger sniffing about above the trap-door; and then, through the slight opening which he had left, he could perceive a dark substance intercepting the light. A low savage growl made him aware that the tiger had scented his presence in the cavern; and returning up the steps, he suddenly thrust the torch upward in such a way that the flame ascended through the crevice. So furious a roar burst from the throat of the tiger that the ruins appeared to be all alive with horrible sounds; and the Burker was terrified at the result of his proceeding. He listened with suspended breath: he could hear nothing—he hoped that the wild beast was gone. The torch was burning out: in a few more minutes he would be in darkness. All continued silent: he began to breathe more freely: but now the torch was extinct. Should he ascend from the cavern?—dared he leave his hiding-place? At all events should he not first carry out his design of securing as much coin as possible about his person?

Scarcely had he mentally asked himself these questions,—or rather, we should say, scarcely were they shaped by the current of his thoughts, when another subdued growl reached his ears; and this was speedily followed by different sounds. There was the tearing down of masonry—the hurling about of stones—the rushing movements of the wild beast,—all mingled with fierce and savage, but still subdued growlings. The Burker speedily comprehended what the monster was about. The tiger had discovered the corpse of the Gossoon in its rude uncouth sepulchre; and the beast was clearing all obstacles away, previous to dragging it forth. Now the Burker could at length tell that this was achieved: for the noise of the tiger's savage gambollings reached the ears of the horrified wretch who was pent up in the cavern. As a cat plays with a mouse, so was the wild beast disporting with the dead body.

The Burker was in utter darkness, save and except where a feeble glimmering penetrated through the chink caused by the slightly opened trap-door: but this gleaming was gradually growing fainter and fainter, as the shades of evening were closing in upon the earth. Good heavens! was the Englishman to remain all night in that cavern, with the horrible tiger watching an opportunity to make him its prey? The thought was enough to turn his brain. There he was, surrounded by riches sufficient to enable him to revel in all luxuries for the remainder of his life, however extended that life might be: but he would gladly give all the contents of those jars for the privilege of being seated in some wretched khan, over a sorry mess of rice, so long as it was in the midst of a town within the limits of which the tiger would not be likely to come.

It did not appear that the wild beast chose to banquet upon the dead man: the tiger was doubtless waiting for the living one. Its maw required to be refreshed with the warm blood gushing from veins just torn open; and it could not be appeased by the blood that had stagnated in the veins of the dead. But ever and anon the tiger came to the trap-door at the mouth of the cavern—scraping, scratching, and tearing with its paws, as if by some means to widen the chink left by the partially opened masonry. Then, at those times, the Burker's blood would curdle almost as completely as that of the dead Gossoon: for he was tortured with the horrible apprehension that the tiger might manage to tear open the trap-door, or rather make it slide completely back. And during the intervals between the wild beast's visits to the trap-door, other frightful ideas crept into the Burker's mind. Perhaps there might be reptiles in that cavern? perhaps *some deadly* snake was gliding towards him, stealthy, insidious, and noiseless, to dart at his leg or twine up it? Oh! what maledictions did the Burker invoke upon the jars of treasure which he had discovered!—how heartily did he wish that the instant the Gossoon was dead he had rushed away from the spot!

An hour passed in the frightful manner which we have been describing, until at length the tiger stretched itself down upon the trap-door, as if resolved to wait until its intended victim should be by some means or another compelled to come forth. At first the wild beast was restless and uneasy, continuing to claw at that trap-door, and growling, sometimes loudly, sometimes in a subdued manner, until at length it appeared to fall asleep—or at all events it remained perfectly still. The Burker was fearful lest the monstrous beast should lie so completely over the chink as to shut out all the fresh air; for he had already become sensible of the close and stagnating nature of the atmosphere in that subterranean. But it happened that the tiger did not thus cover up that opening with its furred form: no doubt it was lying there with its muzzle close to the very opening itself, so as to be in readiness to seize upon its victim at his first endeavour to issue from the subterranean trap in which, mouse-like, he was caught.

Thus passed the night. We might fill whole pages by depicting the horrible thoughts which raged and agitated in the mind of the Burker—thoughts which fastened like vulture-talons on his brain—thoughts which at one time goaded him almost to madness, and which at another froze all the blood in his veins and produced a sensation which struck like an ice-chill to his heart. But all these details we must leave to be elaborated by the conception of our readers. Suffice it to say that the Burker passed such a night as must have atoned—if earthly penalties ever *can* atone—for no small portion of the misdeeds that had branded his life!

As the morning began to dawn, the tiger rose from off the trap-door, and walked round and round it for upwards of an hour, giving vent to subdued growls the whole time. Then, suddenly —with one tremendous roar—it appeared to fling itself with a kind of desperation upon the partial opening of the trap-door, tearing at it with its claws, lashing its own sides and the ground with its tail—evidently furious and frantic at being thus kept away from the victim it sought to clutch: but at last finding its efforts were all of no avail, the animal desisted, and the Burker could hear its cat-like paces retreating from the vicinage of the trap-door. Nearly an hour passed; and there were no evidences of the return of the tiger nor of its presence anywhere within the precincts of the ruins. The Burker began to take courage: he knew that wild beasts seldom prowl about in the open country during the broad daylight; and he was resolved that the monster should not catch him there again in the evening. Cautiously sliding back the trap-door, he looked out; and the coast seemed clear—at least within the range of his vision. He felt cheered and invigorated by breathing the fresh air; and emerging completely from the cavern, he looked in the direction of the spot where he had concealed the Gossoon. A hideous spectacle met his eyes. All the clothing was stripped off the corpse, and lay scattered about in rags and tatters. The stones with which the dead body were covered, had been cast or rolled to a considerable distance—thereby proving the strength of the wild beast. As for the corpse itself, it was frightfully lacerated, mangled, and mutilated: in many places the flesh was completely torn off the bones by the claws of the tiger; but it did not appear as if the animal had banqueted upon any of the flesh.

The Burker had possessed himself of the dead Gossoon's wallet, containing the remnant of that individual's provisions; and he now made a copious meal, washing it down with a good draught of the potent alcohol. He then resolved to carry into execution his plan of quitting the ruins: but first he peeped cautiously forth to assure himself that the tiger was not still loitering about in the neighbourhood. On this point he was satisfied; and descending again into the cavern, he was about to secure a quantity of the treasure—as much indeed as he could carry off—when he heard a singular sound, like the blowing of a trumpet. Rushing up the steps, he looked forth from the ruins; and he beheld a colossal elephant approaching, with a mahout, or driver, seated upon his back. This individual was a Hindoo—not above thirty years of age—with rather a handsome countenance—and an expression of benevolence as well as of good-humour. He did not exhibit much surprise on beholding the Burker,—doubtless for the reason that he was accustomed to frequent those cities and towns where Europeans swarmed; and he addressed the Englishman in the customary terms of morning salutation. These the Burker understood; and he replied to the best of his ability. Pleased with the aspect of the man —taking his demeanour to be friendly—and gazing upon the colossal proportions of the elephant, which had sent forth that trumpet-sound from its trunk,—the Burker was smitten with an idea. He would make a confidant of the mahout in respect to the treasure; the whole or at least the greater portion might be conveyed away by the elephant; and when some distant place of safety was reached, it might be fairly divided.

The Burker accordingly made rapid signs for the mahout to enter the ruins with him; and he likewise spoke as many words of Hindostanee as he could command, to make his new acquaintance aware that a tiger had visited the scene, so that the mahout should be prepared for beholding the mangled corpse of the Gossoon. On the terrible word "tiger" being mentioned, the Hindoo armed himself with a brace of pistols, which were in the holsters attached to the girth of the little seat upon the elephant's back; and quitting the docile animal, he followed the Burker into the ruins. The Hindoo was horrified on beholding the corpse of the Gossoon: but by his looks he evidently comprehended that the Burker had told him the truth in respect to the mutilations having been effected by a wild beast. The Englishman now directed the mahout's attention to the sliding trap-door; and lighting a torch, he led the way down into the cavern. The Hindoo followed him in fullest confidence — as indeed he well might; for he was armed with pistols and other weapons, whereas the Burker was defenceless. On beholding the vases filled with coins, the native's countenance expressed admiration, wonder, and joy; and the Englishman, by means of signs and the few words which he could command, gave him to understand that they would remove and share this hoard of wealth. The mahout grasped the Burker's hand in ratification of the bargain, as well as in token of friendship; and they went to work accordingly.

The mahout was provided with immense bags, in which he was accustomed to carry the elephant's provender: these were slung over the animal's back—the jars were brought forth—and the coin was consigned to those sacks. But the Hindoo—though an honest, good-tempered fellow—was not altogether without the characteristic cunning of his race; and in order to prevent the coins from jingling in the bags, he expertly put thin layers of grass and large leaves. In a short time the sacks were filled to the extent which the mahout thought the elephant could conveniently bear; and the remainder of the coin was secured about the persons of the two men.

They now set out together, both mounted upon the elephant; and the Burker was rejoiced to find that the mahout's way was in quite the contrary direction from the town where he had seen the horrible tortures administered, and whence he had been scared off by the warning of the police official. The Hindoo endeavoured to make the Burker understand the destination for which he was bound and the length of the journey which he had to perform: but the Englishman's acquaintance with Hindostanee was much too limited to enable him to comprehend his new friend's meaning. It was however sufficient for the Burker that he had at length fallen in with one who seemed friendly disposed towards him, and who had an identical interest with his own, so to speak, in reference to the treasure whereof they had obtained possession.

In a few hours a town became visible in the distance; and the travellers reached a point where the road branched off into two—one leading direct towards that town. The mahout guided the elephant into the diverging road,—making signs to the Burker that it would be prudent to avoid the town, for fear lest the secret of the treasure should be discovered. They presently halted at a farm-house, where the mahout displayed some document which he carried about with him; and the presentation of this paper at once ensured the two travellers a hospitable reception. The Burker therefore concluded that the elephant and its driver belonged to some high authority, whose hands had furnished the passport which thus commanded friendly treatment.

At that farm-house they remained during the sultriest hours of the day,—the mahout keeping his eye continuously upon the elephant, so as to prevent any person about the premises from detecting the secret of the treasure: nor did it appear to excite any astonishment that he would not suffer the animal to be relieved from the burden which he carried. Towards evening the journey was renewed; and it was continued until about an hour after dusk, when another halt was made at a village, or rather large hamlet, consisting of about three dozen wretched hovels. Here the presentation of the passport secured for the elephant the only stable that was to be found in the place; and the mahout took care that no one else should be present when he and the Burker relieved the animal from its load. Having furnished the elephant with provender, and locked up the stable, the mahout, followed by the Englishman, proceeded to the khan,—where an ample meal was provided from the residence of the Mayor of the village. A flask of good liquor accompanied it: the Hindoo and the Englishman ate and drank to their hearts' content; and the more the latter saw of the former, the better he liked him. Presently the native produced pipes and tobacco—a luxury of which the Burker gladly availed himself: but he had not smoked long when he felt as if his head were swimming round — the pipe dropped from his hand—and he sank upon the bench in the unconsciousnes of profound slumber.

When he awoke in the morning, he was some time before he could collect his ideas: but when his memory began to grow settled, an idea of treachery on the part of the mahout swept through his brain. This appeared to receive a terrible confirmation, when on looking around, he discovered that he was alone. He was on the point of giving way to his rage, when he felt that the money he had secured about his person was still all in safety there; and in a few moments the mahout made his appearance. The Burker's countenance instantaneously cleared up—while the native burst out into a merry peal of laughter, at the same time pointing to the broken pipe which lay upon the floor, and tapping his head significantly. The Burker comprehended his friend's meaning, which was to the effect that the tobacco had proved too strong for him. The mahout had been to look after his elephant; a good meal was now brought in from the Mayor's cottage; and the Burker did all the more justice to the provisions, inasmuch as his mind was relieved from the cruel apprehensions which for a moment had smitten it; and he now felt that the completest reliance could be placed in the integrity of his companion.

The journey was resumed: and for two or three hours the road lay through a tract of country where habitations were to be seen only at very distant intervals. At length, at about mid-day, when the heat of the sun was growing of an intolerable sultriness, a halt was made at a farm-house at no great distance from a town which appeared to be of considerable extent. The Hindoo however gave the Burker to understand that the town would be avoided when their journey was resumed. The passport, as heretofore, ensured the travellers a welcome reception on the part of the native and his family who inhabited the farm-house; and still the mahout looked carefully after his elephant.

They had not been half-an-hour at this farm-house, when half-a-dozen horsemen were seen advancing; and the Burker felt somewhat uncomfortable on recognising the uniforms of the Peons, or policemen. He fancied likewise, by the aspect of the mahout, that this individual would rather have avoided the company into which he was about to be thrown. The Peons came up, dismounted from their horses, and led them into the stable to which the elephant had been consigned. Just within the doorway of the stable the mahout and the Burker had posted themselves; and they were at the time partaking of the *provisions so bounteously* furnished by the occupants of the farm-house.

The Peons looked suspiciously at the Burker: but the mahout hastened to say something—which produced a change in their aspect; and the native himself went on conversing with the new-comers in a friendly manner. The Peons proceeded to stable their horses; while the mahout glanced anxiously at the Burker and then at his elephant; so that he was evidently uneasy in respect to the secret of the treasure. One of the Peons, while attending to his horse, happened to knock his elbow with some degree of severity against the sack that was nearest,—the burden having remained upon the elephant's back: for the mahout had feared that if he and the Burker removed it, its exceeding weight would have excited the suspicions of the inhabitants of the farm-house. The Peon, evidently astonished at the hardness of the contents of that sack, proceeded, with a curiosity that was natural enough, to feel the bag with his hand; and he soon discovered that it was filled with coin. An ejaculation made known this discovery to his companions; and, abandoning their horses, they hastened to the spot.

The mahout flung upon the Burker a glance which was as much as to imply that all their presence of mind would now be needed; and then, with a remarkable self-possession on his own part, he hastened to give the Peons some explanation. What this was, the Burker could not understand: but it evidently required to be backed by some corroborative testimony; for the mahout, producing his passport, or whatever the official document were, displayed it to the Peons. They looked at each other, and shook their heads dubiously. The Burker felt that a storm was about to burst; and he was taught another moral, to the effect that the possession of riches does not always ensure the contentment, happiness, and safety of their owner. Indeed this moral was very energetically illustrated, when the Peons seized upon himself and the elephant-driver.

The mahout protested vehemently against this proceeding—and with so much appearance of truthfulness on his side, that the Burker could scarcely believe he had told a tissue of falsehoods to account for the bags being filled with coin—though he had indeed done so. The Peons were however incredulous; and while some of them retained the Burker and the mahout in their custody, the others proceeded to examine the sacks. When they found that these contained such a vast quantity of treasure, and that the coins themselves were blackened with age, they were more remote than ever from giving credit to the tale, whatever it were, which the elephant-driver had told them. A personal examination, moreover, made them aware that the two prisoners had large amounts of similar coin concealed amongst their garments; and therefore the minds of the police-officials were made up relative to the course which they should pursue. This was communicated to the mahout, who furtively flung upon his English companion anything but a pleasant look. Some of the tenants of the homestead now gathered at the stable-door; and the Burker saw that himself and his comrade in misfortune were looked upon with a very evil eye, as if indeed they were a couple of arrant knaves and thieves, or even worse.

To be brief—when the sultry hours had passed away, and evening was approaching—the cavalcade was put in motion: the Peons took charge of the elephant—the mahout and the Burker were conducted as prisoners to that town which they had already seen in the neighbourhood. On arriving there, the captives were led into the presence of an officer of the Peons; and the mahout told his story, at the same time producing his passport. We should observe that all the coin which he and the Burker had about their persons, was already taken possession of by the Peons at the farm-house.

The officer of the Peons listened with attention; and when the mahout had finished, he addressed a few words to the Burker. This individual gave the official to understand that he was not acquainted with the Hindostanee tongue: but a native interpreter was speedily forthcoming. Through this medium, the Burker was desired to explain what he knew of the circumstances that had led to the arrest of himself and his companion. He felt horribly perplexed. What tale could he possibly tell?—how could he render it consistent with that which the mahout had already told, and of the nature of which he was in the profoundest ignorance? Something however must be said; and the Burker was not very long at a loss upon the subject. He accordingly declared that he had fallen in with the mahout on the previous day—that the elephant-driver had given him a lift upon his animal—and that as the bags were too plethoric with their metallic contents, he had been asked as a favour to carry a portion about his own person. The Burker was then desired to account for the fact that two small bags of new rupees had been found upon him; for it was intimated that his personal appearance did not warrant the idea that he possessed any such resources of his own—or at least did not justify the belief that he had honestly come by them. Thinking that the money would never be restored to him, and that he had better boldly renounce all ownership of it, the Burker declared that the two bags of new rupees had likewise been entrusted to him by the mahout. When all these statements were interpreted to the officer of Peons, the elephant-driver bent a look of reproach upon the Burker, evidently to accuse him of the blackest ingratitude in endeavouring to shift all the blame from his own shoulders to those of his companion. It was quite clear to the Englishman that his statements were completely at variance with those made by the mahout: for the examining police-official shook his head incredulously, and issued some order to his underlings. This mandate was promptly obeyed; for the Burker and the elephant-driver were hurried into an adjacent room;—and here the horrified eyes of the Englishman fell upon implements of torture similar to those which he had seen at the town whence he was expelled with so significant a warning. As for the mahout, he folded his arms and contemplated the torture-instruments with a courageous resignation.

The Burker was the first to be subjected to the torturing process,—the interpreter standing near to receive whatsoever revelations might be extracted from his lips. The kittee was applied to his fingers: the excruciation was exquisite; and under the influence thereof he confessed the whole truth in respect to the discovery of the buried treasure. With regard to the two bags of rupees—which, as the reader will recollect, were obtained by the murder of the Ryot—the Burker declared that he had found them on the person of a Gossoon who was killed by a tiger.

The mahout was next subjected to the torture; and the truth was speedily elicited from his lips. It was now found that the two tales corresponded: but by way of punishing the prisoners, a severe beating was inflicted upon them with sticks and whips. The Burker howled horribly: the Hindoo exhibited far more courage in enduring the chastisement. The officer of Peons then pronounced a decision in the case, which was duly interpreted to the Burker. It was to the effect that the treasure which had been found belonged to the Government, and should be appropriated accordingly; that with regard to the two bags of new rupees found upon the Burker himself, he had no right to self-appropriate the money belonging to the Gossoon who was killed by the tiger; and that therefore all such moneys should be devoted to public charity—(or, in other words, would go into the pockets of the Peons themselves). Lastly, it was ordained that both the prisoners should be set at liberty, with free permission to pursue their ways—the mahout having the elephant restored to him.

The Burker, on being released, slunk out of the torture-room, not daring to meet the indignant looks of his late companion, with whom he felt all friendship to be completely at an end. Thus, with an empty wallet at his back, and not the smallest coin in his pocket, the Englishman found himself once more a friendless outcast and forlorn wanderer in that land where the most terrible calamities had already befallen him. His fingers were cruelly swollen with the application of the kittee: his body was all bruised and his limbs stiffened with the fustigation he had received. It was night; and he dragged himself painfully through the streets of the town. He looked about for the public khan; and after awhile succeeded in finding it. But it was occupied by a number of

Gossoons and other travellers of the lowest class; and he beheld little sympathy in their looks—though he gave them to understand that he was hungry and foodless. One of the Gossoons, happening to notice his swollen fingers, ejaculated a few words, amongst which *kittee* was the only one that was intelligible to the Burker's ears; and the whole assembly burst forth into a loud laugh. At length a snake-charmer—who had his basket of cobras near him—taking compassion upon the wretched Englishman, gave him a portion of his rice; and the Burker, retreating into the darkest corner, devoured the meal with avidity. He then lay down to sleep; and when morning dawned, he wakened to a renewed sense of his utter loneliness—his complete friendlessness—his hopeless, miserable condition.

To the snake-charmer he was indebted for another meal: he then issued from the khan: but as he was threading the street, he met the interpreter who had officiated on the previous evening. This individual gave him to understand that if he were wise he would not be seen loitering about the town; and he accordingly profited by this counsel. He left the place, resuming his wanderings in the open country. Again did despair seize upon him: but still he had not the courage to put an end to his miseries by means of suicide. By degrees he began to buoy himself up with the hope that something might yet transpire to refill his pocket—in which case he was resolved to act more prudently than he had hitherto done. He bitterly repented his unhandsome conduct towards the elephant-driver,—inasmuch as this individual, naturally generous-hearted, might have befriended him had he only remained stanch when the examination was over. But it was too late to regret that which could not be recalled; and the Burker was taught another severe lesson relative to the disastrous consequences of iniquitous behaviour towards one's fellow-creatures.

CHAPTER CLXI.

THE DANCERS.

Beneath the rays of the burning Indian sun, that outcast European toiled upon his way. Since he escaped from prisonage in the royal city of Inderabad, what adventures had he experienced! what perils had he passed through! what sights had he witnessed! If suddenly some good genius or friendly hand had transported him back to his native clime, what a book could he have written of his experiences of Indian life! He had been cast into the midst of all the worst and most hideous phases of that oriental existence, as if he had been flung into a morass swarming with reptiles. He had seen the combats of wild beasts; he had listened to the crashing of bones when circled by the deadly folds of the monster snake; he had lain down to rest amidst the haunts of serpents; he had battled with Stranglers; he had been the associate of the Gossoon; he had penetrated into the secret treasure-chamber of the once proud Pagan temple; he had witnessed and endured the torture inflicted by the native officials under the sanction of the British authorities. Yes—what a volume could this man have written, had he possessed the ability and were he placed in a position to do so! But what was to be his doom?—what destiny was in store for him? Had it been typified in any horrible occurrence which he himself had witnessed? or was some new phase of hideous excruciation to develop itself to seal the fate of that man of a thousand misdeeds?

After he quitted the town he was, as we have seen, for awhile a prey to despair: but his was one of those resolute dogged callous souls—a soul so tanned, hardened, and petrified by an existence of peril and of crime—that it was scarcely probable he would long abandon himself to despondency when no immediate danger was staring him in the face. Thus was it that homeless, friendless, foodless, and moneyless though he were, he still found something worth living for: he even entertained the hope that things might mend, and that accident would again turn up some advantage for him especially to reap.

He continued his way until the heat was growing intolerable; and then he approached a farmhouse for the purpose of soliciting refuge and refreshment. He was however driven away by several native labourers, who liked not his appearance; and his wanderings were continued. Presently he reached a long avenue of trees overshadowing a stream, beyond which stretched the undulating fields; and he fancied that he heard the sounds of female voices. He drew nearer: he looked through the trees; and he beheld a number of dusky native girls disporting in the water. They were in a completely nude condition, though the greater portion of their forms was immersed in the streamlet. All of them were exceedingly beautiful; and the Englishman was struck by the admirable modelling of the contours of the busts. Their long jetty hair, now shining with the gloss of moisture, floated over their sculptural shoulders and down ther backs; and their dark eyes acquired an additional lustre from the pearly drops which hung to the long ebon lashes and glistened in the sunbeams that penetrated through the openings in the trees. They were gambolling and disporting as if they were the dusky naiads of their own native rivers,—now diving down to the depths of the stream—now plunging in their heads, and then smoothing their hair to wring out the water—now spattering and splashing each other—and all the while laughing and chatting merrily. It was an interesting scene: but the Burker viewed it only with eyes that gloated upon the charms which were revealed, and with an imagination that grew more and more inflamed with desire.

A little farther along the stream, a number of young men were bathing; and they likewise were disporting in the water. The Burker did not immediately catch sight of them, so intent was he on feasting his eyes with the former spectacle which we have described. But at length he heard some of the girls calling to the young men, and the latter answering; so that he was thus led to surmise they all belonged to the same party.

Presently the young women began one after another to ascend from the stream, and slowly to resume their apparel. The Burker, still remaining concealed from their observation, watched them with devouring eyes; and slowly the thought crept into his mind that he had before seen two or three

of those handsome feminine countenances. Perhaps the idea itself was engendered by the nature of the garb which the girls were putting on; for this apparel was at least familiar to him. Yes! —there could be no doubt: it was the troop of dancers whom he had seen in the jungle, when he had watched them from the interior of the cave, and when the tiger, springing from the thicket, had seized upon the snake-charmer at the very moment his limbs were encircled by the fangless reptiles.

The Burker had noticed in the jungle—and the impression was now confirmed—that there was a considerable degree of good-humour, kindness, and friendly familiarity in the bearing of those dancers towards each other, the male as well as the female; and he began to think it was by no means improbable that they would suffer him to join them. He however felt that it would scarcely prove a passport to their favour if he were discovered peering in through the trees upon their ablutionary recreations; and he therefore retreated to a more respectful distance. There he sat down, and awaited till they should come forth from beneath the shade of the spot that they had selected for their bath.

In a few minutes the girls made their appearance in a body; and not perceiving the Burker, they began practising a dance, in a style similar to that which he had witnessed from the cavern in the jungle. There was the same elegance of motion, combined with wantonness of look—the same study to poetise in the dance all the most sensuous feelings of which human nature is susceptible—the same system of appeal, by gestures, by attitudes, and by the expression of countenances, to the libidinous imagination. The young men joined them; and the dance was continued, until all being exhausted, they sat down upon the grass. Then baskets of provisions were produced; and the

Burker thought it high time to introduce himself to the notice of those whom he hoped to be permitted to join as a hanger-on in some capacity or another, even though it were as the porter of those very baskets the contents of which reminded him that he was hungry.

Notwithstanding the revolting ugliness of his looks, there was about the Burker an air of so much misery, mingled with so earnest an appeal to the humanity of these natives, that they—naturally good-hearted—at once gave him a sort of welcome; and sitting down near them, he received a considerable ration of provender. While he was eating, the natives whispered together: then they addressed themselves to him: but they soon found that he was unable to comprehend much of their own language. They however succeeded in conveying to him the assurance that if he were a friendless and unfortunate man, they would allow him to be a sort of follower in their company—that he might carry a portion of their baggage, and that he should at least be certain of obtaining a meal. Perhaps, amidst their good-natured inclinations, was blended the somewhat more selfish consideration that the presence of an European attached to their company would be calculated to excite sympathy and augment the amount of their usual receipts.

After having rested for some hours in the shade of the trees, the party put itself in motion; and proceeding across a fertile and beautiful tract of country, reached a large town shortly after nightfall. Here the men took up their quarters at the public khan: but the females found a lodging at some private house in the neighbourhood. On the following morning the males and females formed company again; and they commenced their avocations in the public thoroughfares,—choosing those places that were overlooked by the handsomest and most imposing habitations. There were several English residents in this town; and as the Burker was put forward to receive the contributions of the spectators, he was speedily accosted by some of his fellow-countrymen. It was the first time for a considerable period that he had thus conversed with any one belonging to his own native land; and even with such a wretch as this, there was a certain pleasurable feeling in the circumstance. He had a tale ready prepared; for he was naturally anxious to avoid the slightest hint that might lead to his identification with the individual who had escaped from captivity in Inderabad. He told a story of shipwreck—of his sole survivorship from the catastrophe—of long and painful wanderings—of the miseries he had endured—and of the kindness which he experienced on the part of those natives with whom he was now connected. The result was that rupees showered in upon him; and the donations were all the more liberal on account of the favourable representations which he made in respect to the troop of dancers whom he accompanied. A few hours sufficed for the reaping of a considerable pecuniary harvest; and on his return to the khan, the Burker feasted in a sumptuous manner with the male portion of the company.

For about three weeks he travelled with his new friends; and they had no reason to regret the kindness they had in the first instance bestowed upon him; for as they had foreseen, their ordinary receipts were trebled and quadrupled. He soon found that the dancing girls were as profligate as they were beautiful: they had their paramours, almost indiscriminately, amongst their male companions: and they readily sold themselves to any individuals amongst the spectators whom they might chance to please. The Burker beheld scenes which excited his own desires almost to a perfect frenzy: but if ever he himself made the slightest advance towards any of the Hindoo girls, his overture was received with a peal of laughter. At some of the towns where they stopped, the girls were hired to dance at private parties given by wealthy natives; and it was seldom on such occasions that some of them failed to captivate a few of the male guests,—the result being profitable to the beautiful but unprincipled females who thus readily bartered their charms for gold.

Money poured in so fast that the itinerants were enabled to add many comforts to the little moveable property which they had previously possessed. They purchased, amongst other things, a couple of tents; and thus during their journeys they were enabled to erect their temporary habitations in the most pleasant spots which they reached. They lived luxuriously: they replenished their wardrobes: but they would not permit the Burker to change his own travel-soiled costume for a better one—because they had found by experience that the more miserable his appearance, the greater was the sympathy of the public. In all other respects he profited equally with themselves in the pecuniary harvest which they reaped in every town, village, or hamlet where they stopped; and he was treated with exceeding kindness by his companions.

There was one of the girls whose beauty transcended that of all the others. She was, tall and superbly formed,—her whole appearance reminding the Burker of Indora's ayah, the deceased Sagoonah. This dancing-girl of whom we are speaking, made a deep impression upon the Englishman: or rather, we should say, her beauty excited his imagination to a pitch that was almost intolerable. She had a paramour—perhaps two or three—amongst the male members of the company; and she was likewise a special favourite amongst those libertines who in the towns intrigued with the dancing-girls. The Burker on two or three occasions, when under the influence of liquor, had seized opportunities to throw amorous looks upon this girl: but she had invariably responded with a peal of merry laughter. There was nothing scornful nor derisive in it: it was only the joyous, careless merriment of a female who found herself solicited by a very unloveable being,—a being whose ugliness imparted a ludicrousness to any overtures coming from such a quarter. But even when she thus laughed, she looked all the more handsome: for her red lips revealed two rows of teeth which, though somewhat large, were as white as ivory and faultlessly even; while at the same time the hilarity of her thoughts infused additional lustre into her large black mischievous eyes. The costume which she wore, and which was similar to that of her female companions, displayed the contours of the bust most voluptuously; and the Burker was wont to feast his eyes upon those charms until at last he felt that he must do something desperate in order to gratify his passion.

We have already said that the itinerants had purchased tents; and these, during their journeys, were erected for four or five hours each afternoon, when the heat of the sun rendered travelling impossible. One day, the tents were set up in the midst of a field of soft sweet grass; and at a little distance there was a meandering stream. The itinerants proposed that there should be a general bathing: but the Burker refused to be one of the party; for knowing that there were alligators in the rivers of Hindostan, he shuddered at the idea of committing his person to those treacherous waters. He therefore remained in one of the tents; while all his male companions proceeded to the river.

Now, it happened that the very dancing-girl of whom he had become so much enamoured, declined for some reason or another to accompany her female friends to the spot where they were to refresh themselves with immersion in the stream. She remained in the other tent, entirely ignorant that the Burker was in the adjacent one,—as he likewise was unaware that she had also stayed behind. He was reclining upon the grass inside the tent, thinking of that girl—suffering his imagination to gloat upon her charms—when the sound of her voice was wafted to his ears. She was singing: her voice was a beautiful one; it was full of melody; and even so hardened, callous, and embruted a soul as that of the Burker was touched by its harmony. He rose from the grass: he advanced to the entrance of the tent—and he listened. He knew the voice; and it struck him that the girl might be alone. Creeping cautiously to the tent which she occupied, he lay down flat upon his face — lifted the canvass an inch or two — and peeped in. The girl was changing her apparel,—singing to herself the while, unsuspicious of impending danger.

The Burker felt that this was his opportunity. The spectacle which he beheld of that half-naked female maddened him to a degree that if the most hideous death were to prove the inevitable consequence, he could not restrain himself. All of a sudden he appeared at the entrance of the tent. The Hindoo girl was for a moment startled—and for a moment frightened too, at the sinister gloating looks of the English hanger-on of the company: but quickly recovering her self-possession, she smiled in a deprecating manner, as much as to bid him observe that he was taking a liberty. At the same time, with a movement as languid as her sense of modesty was slight, she threw a garment over the bust that was previously exposed in all its voluptuous nakedness; and as the Burker still lingered, she now made him a more imperative sign to withdraw. Instead of obeying her, he rushed forward and seized her in his arms. She did not scream out: but with all the elasticity of the serpent—a suppleness which served her even better than mere physical strength would have done—she in a moment disengaged herself from his embrace,—gliding out of it as it were in a manner which he himself could scarcely comprehend. In the twinkling of an eye she was at the farther extremity of the tent; and thinking that the Burker would be satisfied with this repulse, she smiled good-humouredly, entreating him at the same time in her own native language to withdraw. But the garment which she had thrown over her shoulders, remained in the Burker's arms, as if it were the mere phantom of the substantial, warm, and glowing shape which for an instant those arms had retained in their fervid pressure. Maddened by the spectacle of her nude beauties, he rushed forward again: but the girl eluded him—and darting forth from the tent, she sped towards her female companions, who were bathing in the river at a little distance from the male members of the troop.

A terrible execration burst from the lips of the Burker as he rushed after her: but she was soon far ahead;—and he stopped short. He now cursed himself for what he had done: he was afraid lest he should draw down upon his head the vindictive rage of the girl's friends. He stood irresolute how to act: but not long did he remain thus undecided; for in a few minutes he beheld the whole company, male and female, rushing towards him. They were but partially dressed: they had evidently hurried out of the water at the hasty entreaties of the girl. The Burker fled precipitately.

Away he ran across the fields,—some of the men pursuing him, and shouting in vindictive accents. The Burker ran for his life: never perhaps had he put forth such speed! Glancing over his shoulder, he found to his delight that he was distancing his pursuers,—until at length they were no longer within the range of his vision.

But now he was once more a solitary wanderer. By an act of infatuated madness he had all in a moment severed the ties which connected him with a number of beings who were veritably his friends, and in whose company he had enjoyed personal security, luxurious living, and cheerful society. He cursed himself over and over again for his unmitigated folly: he even thought of retracing his steps and grovelling upon his knees to implore forgiveness: but he dreaded lest he should fall a victim to those darker qualities of the Hindoo character which his conduct had excited. He therefore continued his way; and in about an hour he reached a village, where he purchased some rice—for he had a few rupees in his pocket. Proceeding to the khan, he cooked his provisions, and passed the night there,—he being the only tenant of the place. For the next three or four days he wandered on without experiencing any adventure worthy of note, but entertaining the hope that something would turn up to relieve him from these solitary peregrinations. He observed at the different towns and hamlets where he stopped, or through which he passed, that there were no officials in the Anglo-Indian uniform; and he therefore concluded that his wandering steps had again led him into the dominions of some independent prince. This was a subject for rejoicing, inasmuch as he had sore remembrance of the torture-chambers that he had witnessed: but on the other hand he dreaded lest he should by any possibility have entered the boundaries of Queen Indora's realm.

His money was now all gone: the last coin had been expended upon food; and nothing had transpired to afford him fresh companionship or to promise a pecuniary resource. It was early one morning, that having slept at a khan in a large village, the Burker was journeying along a road, when he beheld an elephant advancing from the opposite direction. It was conducted by a mahout; and as it drew nearer, the Burker recognised the very individual to whom he had behaved so unhandsomely. His first impulse was to turn out of the road, and strike into the fields: but a second thought induced him to proceed. He recollected the good-tempered character of the mahout: he felt assured that he was not vindictive; and he reasoned within himself that even if the Hindoo would do him no good, he would not wreak upon him any evil.

As the elephant advanced, the mahout recognised the Burker; and he stopped the animal. The Englishman looked appealingly: the Hindoo seemed irresolute how to act,—until at length his natural kindness prevailed, and he extended his hand in token of forgiveness. The Burker eagerly grasped it; and the mahout, seeking the shade of some neighbouring trees, produced his provisions. He and the Burker sat down together, while the elephant wandered to a little distance; and as the two men ate and drank, the Hindoo made signs to intimate that the Burker's appearance was a miserable one. While the mahout was gazing upon his English companion, a singular change gradually came over his countenance: some idea seemed to be settling into consistency in his brain; and the Burker could not comprehend what was thus passing in his thoughts. Suddenly producing a newspaper, the mahout turned to a particular column—referred to some announcement there—and then again studied the appearance of the Burker. The idea which he had entertained, now seemed to be confirmed; and he placed the newspaper in the Burker's hand. It was printed in the Hindostanee language: there were two or three columns of advertisements, and at the head of several the Burker beheld the name of "INDERABAD." But the mahout pointed to a particular advertisement; and though the Burker could not comprehend it, yet he felt persuaded that it related to himself.

The mahout laid his finger upon that special announcement, and then pointed significantly to the Burker himself. The Englishman was seized with terror lest the mahout, who was well armed, should endeavour to hand him over to the grasp of justice: but the good-natured Hindoo vehemently made reassuring signs. The Burker pointed to the word "INDERABAD:" the mahout slowly waved his arm all around as much as to imply that as far as the vision could reach it was the domain of Queen Indora. He then rose from his seat upon the grass; and placing a few small coins in the Burker's hand, made signs to show that they must part. He called his elephant, which at once obeyed the summons; and when mounted on the animal's back, he pointed in a particular direction, —thereby intimating that it was towards that point the Burker must journey if he wished to pass beyond the limits of Indora's kingdom.

The mahout continued his route, leaving the Burker again all friendless and lonely. The wretched Englishman watched the colossal elephant and the kind-hearted Hindoo till they were out of sight; and more bitterly than ever did he deplore his ungenerous conduct towards one who in other circumstances would evidently have proved so stanch a friend. It was but too plain that his recent apprehensions were well founded, and that he was once more a wanderer within the limits of Queen Indora's dominions. It was likewise evident that his escape had been advertised in the journals of that kingdom, and that a reward had been offered for his recapture. The mahout had indicated the direction which he was to take in order to place himself in safety; and he therefore lost no time in following that friendly suggestion. He journeyed on with rapidity; and for about an hour pursued his way through tracts of country the excellent culture of which, together with the smiling hamlets and neat villages, indicated the prosperity enjoyed by Queen Indora's subjects. The farm-houses were infinitely superior to those which the Burker had seen in the Anglo-Indian territories; and, in a word, there was every indication of a truly paternal government in its most substantial realities, and not in the delusions of a fiction.

The Burker, we said, had journeyed for about an hour after parting from the friendly mahout, when he reached a broad road lined with trees on either side. The immense avenue presented a most grateful shade: but not for many minutes had the Burker paused to rest himself there, when his ear caught the sounds of some approaching cavalcade. He looked in the direction whence those sounds came; and he beheld banners floating at the extremity of the avenue. He hastened to conceal himself in the midst of a knot of shrubs which grew between the more stately trees; and he felt assured that he had chosen a hiding-place impenetrable to the gaze of even the keenest observer.

The procession advanced. First came a squadron of about five hundred cavalry, consisting of native troops, but apparelled in an uniform very much resembling that of British Lancers. They were all fine men; and the high plumes which waved above their heads, gave them the appearance of a towering stature, as they defiled slowly along the avenue. They were all mounted upon splendid steeds; and in front of them were borne the banners which had first met the Burker's eye. Immediately behind this squadron of cavalry, advanced a number of sumpter-horses, attended by some fifty menials, apparelled in uniform of a less martial description than that of their precursors. Then came twelve trumpeters, splendidly attired and all bestriding bright bay steeds. Next appeared six elephants, with magnificent castles upon their backs; and in these castles were seated a bevy of young and beautiful ladies, all richly apparelled, and evidently belonging to the household of some great personage who was yet to appear in the procession. The elephants were followed by twelve handsomely apparelled gentlemen, mounted upon beautiful horses; and these individuals likewise appeared to belong to the establishment of a higher personage who was yet to come within the range of the concealed observer's vision. Those gentlemen in the glittering Court dresses were followed by two light waggons, each drawn by six horses, and on which lay the apparatus for the erection of two superb pavilions. Then came a carriage drawn by six milk-white steeds, whose flowing tails nearly touched the ground. Nothing could exceed the magnificence of their caparisons; and over each one was thrown a rich brocade, embroidered with gold flowers, the delicate texture serving to keep off the insects from the animals. Three postilions, in light elegant liveries, guided that splendid team. The carriage was of corresponding elegance, richness, and beauty. It was lightly constructed, and had a canopy with blue satin curtains, all embroidered in gold. If the reader will picture to himself a canopy, fixed by means of four upright slender shafts of solid silver upon an open English chariot, he may form an idea of the nature of the arrangements of this elegant vehicle.

But who occupied that carriage? From all the former part of the procession which had passed like a gorgeous panorama before him, the concealed Englishman was prepared to behold Queen Indora and her royal husband—that object of all her love whom she had elevated to become the sharer of her mighty and magnificent dominion. And truly, the King and Queen of Inderabad were the occupants of that beautiful equipage. He whom the reader has known as Bertram Vivian, or Clement Redcliffe, or Lord Clandon, was seated in that carriage, by the side of his queenly wife. He wore an Oriental costume; for he had judiciously deemed it prudent to identify himself with the habits and customs of the country which, in sweet partnership with Indora, he was called upon to govern. About his person were the insignia of his kingly office; and if ever there were an instance in which, as an exception to the general rule, the natives of India had reason to bless the presence and the authority of an Englishman, it was in the case of the inhabitants of Inderabad with regard to this monarch who ruled them so wisely and so well. And never perhaps had he of whom we are speaking appeared to greater advantage during this medium period of his life. Time seemed to sit lightly upon him; and, in the vigour of his prime, yet did he look several years younger still.

And Indora, who sat by his side—how gloriously handsome was she!—what grand and gorgeous beauty had the people of Inderabad to admire in the person of their Queen! Her countenance was radiant with happiness as she looked proudly and fondly upon the husband whom she had raised to a throne; and *he* likewise was happy,—for if anything could compensate him for the blight of his first love, it was the wondrous devotion which had been displayed by her who had taught his heart to love a second time!

The procession passed on—another squadron of five hundred lancers closing the rear. The Burker beheld it all from his hiding-place, where his presence remained unsuspected; and before the brilliant panorama faded like a magnificent vision from his view, he heard the clarions, the trumpets, and the horns, sending their loud metallic notes in tuneful harmony along the avenue. At length those sounds died away in the distance: the procession was no longer to be seen; and the Burker came forth from his hiding-place.

CHAPTER CLXII.

THE CATASTROPHE.

THE Englishman pursued his wanderings; and when night came he still continued his way—for he dared not enter any village, for fear lest he should be recognised as the individual advertised in the journals of the kingdom. At an isolated cottage however he had obtained some food, for which he had offered to pay; but the occupants of the tenement had refused a reward for that which they gave from purest motives of charity. All night long did the Englishman wander, following however as well as he could recollect the direction which the friendly mahout had pointed out. He knew that wild beasts prowled at night time; and thus he walked and walked in continuous terror—startled by the rustling of every bough—and frightened by the echoes of his own footsteps. Still he felt it were better to dare any peril, rather than incur the risk of being recaptured by the officials of the kingdom.

When morning dawned, the wretched man was still dragging himself along,—wondering when he should reach the limits of that kingdom, and by what indication he might obtain the assurance that he was beyond the territory of Inderabad. At another isolated cottage he obtained a meal; and again was it given him in charity—again was the reward which he offered, rejected. How different would it have been anywhere in the Anglo-Indian possessions!—so true it is that humane and liberal rulers model the sentiments of the people into humanity and liberality; while on the other hand, rapacious and hard-hearted authorities afford an example which tends to warp the national character with sentiments of rapaciousness, selfishness, and uncharitableness.

For three or four days the Burker wandered on, without experiencing any adventure worthy of particular notice. He continued to receive eleemosynary charity, without finding the proffered recompense accepted,—until one evening he reached a small farm-house where in return for the meal that was furnished him a high price was exacted. Now, although the Burker was but little accustomed to regard matters in reference to the amenities of social considerations, it nevertheless occurred to him that he had entered upon a different province. He had by this time picked up quite a sufficiency of the Hindostanee language to be enabled to put the question,—that question which hitherto he had not dared to put from fear of exciting suspicion. He however gave utterance to it now; and he comprehended the answer. He was no longer within the limits of Queen Indora's kingdom; and therefore in respect to her jurisdiction he felt himself safe. He endeavoured to ascertain in what district of India he actually was: but all he could make out was to the effect that he was *not* within the English possessions.

He pursued his way, now walking with less rapidity, and wondering what would happen next to him in the catalogue of adventures which he appeared destined to experience beneath the burning sun of Hindostan. He had not proceeded very far before he reached an isolated cottage, where he resolved to beg a shelter for the night. He knocked at the door; and it was opened by a fierce-looking native, who surveyed him suspiciously in the clear starlight. This individual was about fifty years of age: his complexion was more swarthy than that of the natives generally: he had a short curling beard; and this, as well as his hair, was grizzled. From beneath his loose garments a brace of huge pistols peeped forth; and there was a dagger stuck without concealment in his belt.

The Burker began to plead piteously for a night's lodging, calling to his aid all the words of the Hindostanee language which he could possibly muster: but the swarthy-faced man, after eyeing him suspiciously for nearly a minute, banged the door in his face. The Burker dared not renew his application, nor make any demonstration of his rage; for the weapons possessed by the uncouth individual left the Englishman completely at a disadvantage. He was however so much fatigued that on dragging himself to a little distance, he sank down, completely exhausted; and strong though his energies naturally were, he had not the power to raise himself, nor even the courage to make the attempt.

It was on a grassy bank by the side of a little streamlet, that he had thus fallen; and the opposite side of the road was thrown into a dense shade by a line of trees. In a few minutes the Burker felt somewhat refreshed—or at all events his faintness had passed off, and he was about to raise himself up to his feet, when his ear caught the sounds of the trampling of horses' hoofs. They appeared to come from the direction of the cottage; and thitherward he looked. He beheld three horses being led round from the back part of the cottage —no doubt from a stable in the rear of the little building. Two men were thus leading them; and a third appeared at the door of the cottage. The starlight was sufficiently brilliant and the Burker was near enough to perceive that this individual who came forth from the habitation, was the same who had so rudely banged the door in his face.

The three men mounted the horses: but previous to taking their departure, one of them—he whom the Burker had so vainly appealed to—issued some instructions to a female, who appeared upon the threshold. The woman replied in a few words; and the men slowly rode away. They were approaching the spot where the Englishman was lying upon the grass: he had already formed but a very indifferent idea of the characters of individuals who could afford to keep horses and who yet frequented such a comparatively wretched hovel:—indeed he took them to be desperadoes of some sort or another; and he therefore fancied that they were quite capable of putting an end to his existence if they had any reason to suspect that he was watching them. He curled himself up as it were, with his face downward—at the same time getting as much beneath the shade of the bank as possible; and the horsemen passed him by without noticing his presence. The Burker suffered them to get to a considerable distance before he rose to his feet; and then he began to reflect at leisure upon the circumstances which had just occurred. He thought that inasmuch as the man had given parting instructions to the woman, she was, most probably the only person left in the cottage. The men had most likely gone forth for some considerable time—at all events for an hour or two; and the idea was strong in the Burker's mind that he had seen the commencement of an adventure which it was worth while to carry out. He drew nearer to the cottage: he crept up to the window—he listened, but heard no voices speaking. He made the circuit of the building: it was a very small one: and the more closely he inspected it, the meaner was its appearance. He again posted himself at the window; and through a crevice he could now obtain a view of the interior of the apartment.

The only occupant thereof was an old woman, the redness of whose blear eyes was thrown out into horrible relief by the swarthiness of her complexion. Her mouth had completely fallen in through the loss of teeth: her nose and chin, which must always have been prominent, even in her youth, appeared nearly to meet. Her hair, which was grey, hung straight down her back: her form was bowed; and her hands trembled with age as she lifted the food to her lips: for she was at supper. The table had evidently been spread with an excellent banquet,—with the remnants of which she was now enjoying herself. Enough of the provender however remained to convince the Burker that such diet was inconsistent with the mean appearance of the cottage; and he was thus confirmed in his opinion that the three cavaliers did not earn their living by means which they could honourably and frankly explain to the authorities of the country in which they dwelt.

The old woman kept on eating and eating, ever and anon having recourse to the contents of a bottle which the Burker felt assured must furnish something very potent, for at each draught the hag's eyes grew more inflamed. At length she made an end of her repast; and having leisurely cleared the table, she knelt down in one corner where an old mattress was rolled up. From behind this mattress she drew forth a small wooden box; and thence she took a massive gold chain, a pair of splendid earrings, and three or four other articles of jewellery. These she examined with the greatest attention—holding them up to the light, and placing the gemmed ornaments in such a way as to catch the beams upon the brilliant stones with which they were set. Then she took some warm water in a little wooden bowl; and she began to wash the jewels in a way which convinced the Burker that she was seeking to rub some stains off them—most probably spots of blood. Doubtless, then, those valuable articles were the produce of murder and robbery?—and all that the Burker thus saw confirmed him in his opinion that the three cavaliers were what in other countries would be termed brigands, banditti, or highwaymen.

The Burker continued to watch the old woman for a few minutes longer, in the hope that she might display some more treasures—of which he had already made up his mind to possess himself, if possible. The jewels, being cleansed, were restored to the little box; and thence the old woman drew forth a quantity of gold and silver coins, which she likewise began to examine with a scrutinizing attention. But now the Burker thought it high time to interfere; and he accordingly opened the door, thus bursting with startling abruptness into the cottage.

The old woman gave vent to a shriek at this sudden irruption; and dropping the coins from her hand, she stood in dismayed uncertainty as to the meaning of this startling presence. But the Burker did not give her many moments for reflection: he sprang upon her with as much fierceness as if he were a tiger fresh from some neighbouring jungle; and the frail, weak, emaciated form of the wretched woman was dashed against the wall. His fingers were at her throat: she could not again cry out:—naught but gasping, suffocating sounds emanated from her lips. These were like the gurglings of water endeavouring to force a passage through a pipe where it is pent up. The eyes of the Burker glared with ferocious resolution; he dashed the woman's head against the wall; and he quitted not his hold upon the throat until he acquired the certainty that she was a corpse.

Then he hastened to self-appropriate the jewels and the money which had tempted him to the commission of this horrible crime: he tore the mattress from its corner—he ransacked the whole place: but he found no other spoil worth carrying off. He looked about in the hope of finding some defensive and offensive weapons, with which he might arm himself: but he discovered none. He was thinking of taking his departure; but he could not resist the inclination to refresh himself with the remnants of the food which the hag had placed away in the cupboard. His respects were first of all paid to the bottle unto the contents of which he had seen the woman herself have recourse; and having partaken of a deep draught of the potent spirit, he hastily crammed the provisions into his mouth.

But all of a sudden the rapid advance of horses' hoofs galloping towards the cottage, smote his ears; and he darted forth. It was a beautiful starlit night; and his person was plainly visible to the three horsemen who were returning to the hut; for they were the same individuals who had so recently taken their departure thence, and whose speedy reappearance the Burker had so little anticipated. Ejaculations escaped their lips as they instantaneously suspected that there must be something wrong; for the murderer, in his precipitate retreat, had left the cottage door open. The three horsemen almost immediately overtook him: and with such speed did they thus rush in upon him that it was a perfect miracle he escaped from being trampled beneath the hoofs of the animals which they bestrode. They leapt from their horses, and seized upon him: he was immediately recognised by the bearded individual to whom he had so vainly addressed himself for food and lodging, and who had so unceremoniously banged the door in his face. This man and another held him in their custody; while the third rushed into the cottage. Then cries of rage and astonishment rather than of horror burst from the lips of this last-mentioned person on beholding the spectacle of the murdered woman: but in reference to that spectacle, he was no doubt too much accustomed to deeds of blood to be horrified at it. The truth was quickly proclaimed to his two comrades,—one of whom drew forth a pistol and was about to level it at the Burker's head, when his wrist was caught by the hand of the person with the beard, and who was evidently the chief of the desperadoes. This man hastily ejaculated a few words, of which the Burker comprehended just sufficient to make him aware that instead of being summarily put out of existence, he was to be reserved for a few minutes until his captors could decide upon some punishment which in its horror might be more befitting the atrocity he had perpetrated. He was dragged into the cottage, and the three men were on the point of searching his person,—when the Burker, with a desperate effort, disengaged himself from their grasp, and with such violence that one of the desperadoes was hurled against the wall, where his head struck some projecting object and he remained senseless. A pistol bullet, discharged by the man with the grissled beard, whistled past the Englishman's ear; but in the twinkling of an eye the latter, driven to desperation, sprang at the person just alluded to and hurled him down likewise. All this was the work of a moment; for the Burker seemed to be nerved with the strength of a thousand. The remaining desperado bounded towards him with his drawn dagger:—with one grasp as dexterous as it was powerful, the Burker tore it from his hand, and drove it into his heart. The Hindoo fell back with a loud cry: the Burker gained the door and rushed from the cottage.

Springing upon the nearest steed, he urged the animal into its fleetest gallop: but he quickly found that he was pursued—he had no doubt by the chief of the three desperadoes. For some minutes he continued galloping along at a tremendous pace, until he could no longer conceal from himself the fact that fleet though his progress were, that of his pursuer was more rapid still; and his resolve was quickly taken. He threw himself from his steed,—taking care to alight on the grass which grew thick by the side of the road; and though considerably bruised, he experienced no other injury. He crouched down in the dense shade of the trees, while the horse went careering on; and in a few moments his pursuer dashed past. Then the Burker plunged amidst the trees, gained the fields on the opposite side, and hurried across them as fast as his bruised limbe would permit.

He soon became convinced that he was safe from pursuit; and he relaxed his speed. We have already said that it was a beautful starlit night; and the Burker could thus discern all the features of the landscape through which he was wending his way. There were plenty of trees; but he could distinguish no habitation. He walked on; and thus for a couple of hours he continued his route, until he reached a little village, where he looked about for the khan, if there were one. He was not long in discovering the house of public accommodation: the fire which charity usually provided in those places, was not extinct; and by its light he could perceive an individual seated in the corner. That person recognised him: for in a moment he sprang at the Burker's throat, and dashed him with violence to the ground. The Englishman was stunned by the force of the concussion; and when he came back to consciousness, he found himself alone. He felt in his pockets: the jewels and the coin which he had self-appropriated at the hut, were gone; for the individual who had thus assailed him was the chief of the three desperadoes. Why the man had not taken his life, the Burker could not conceive,—unless it were that he either fancied that the violence of the fall had killed him; or else that he had very recently been seen in that khan by some of the inhabitants of the village, and having his own reasons for not choosing to debar himself of the opportunity of future visits, he had thought it more prudent to abstain from committing a crime of which he must inevitably be suspected as the author. Be this as it may, it is not the less certain that the Englishman had escaped with his life: but he mentally levelled the bitterest imprecations against the robber-chief who had despoiled him of the jewellery and the coins. The Burker did not reflect that this punishment was far less in amount than the retributive justice which was rightfully his due for the barbarous murder he had committed at the cottage.

Afraid that the desperado might possibly think better of having spared his life, or for any other reason might return, the Burker issued from the khan, and resumed his wanderings. The sun, when rising above the eastern hills, found him still painfully dragging himself along; and not a habitation was to be seen. The heat soon became so intense that he was compelled to seek the shade of a group of trees; and he fell fast asleep. He slumbered for several hours; for the sun was considerably past the meridian when he awoke again; and his wanderings were resumed. Still he beheld no habitation—not so much as the humblest cottage where he could implore a meal; and he was famishing. He severely felt the bruises which he had sustained when throwing himself from the horse; and it was with difficulty that he pursued his way.

As the dusk advanced, the Burker fancied that he heard the ominous growl of some wild beast in the distance: he stopped short, the blood freezing in his veins—his hair seeming as if it stood on end. But all was silent: and he continued his way. He knew by this time that several kinds of wild beasts—especially tigers—haunt particular spots; and he therefore put forth all his speed to increase the distance between himself and the place where he fancied the terrible sounds had reached his ear. The night set in with a degree of darkness such as he had not known before ever since these wanderings of his commenced: but still he pursued his way with the continuous hope that the glimmering of a light would at length guide him to some habitation. He had now eaten nothing for twenty-four hours: he was faint with hunger, as well as exhausted with fatigue. Every now and then he fancied that the ominous growl reached him from a distance; and thus he dared not yield to that sense of weariness:—he was compelled to pursue his way.

Through the darkness did he wander on: no beaten road was it that he was now pursuing; and as far as he could possibly judge, the country was growing wilder and wilder. All of a sudden the horrible idea flashed to his mind that he might be penetrating into some jungle; and he stopped short, all the flesh creeping upon his bones. Not long did he deliberate: he turned and endeavoured to retrace his way; but he soon found himself floundering through that long rank grass and amidst that underwood which was so terribly characteristic of the jungle where the most horrible experiences of his Indian life had been obtained. Nothing could exceed the wild horror and anguish which took possession of the miserable man: but he succeeded in extricating himself from the thicket into which his wayward steps had led him; and he stood upon what he conceived to be safer ground. All farther thought of endeavouring to retrace his way was now abandoned; and overcome with exhaustion, he sank down where he was. A species of desperate carelessness now succeeded the agonizing feelings to which he had previously been a prey; and he almost persuaded himself that it would be better if in the slumber to which he meant to yield, some reptile should sting him to death or some wild beast should despatch him at a blow. And soon the man slept.

When he awoke, the sun was just breaking in the eastern horizon; and the Burker, starting up, glanced hurriedly around. Yes—his worst fears were confirmed: it was but too true—he was evidently again in the midst of a jungle. Oh! if any one had seen him at that moment, how ghastly pale he grew!—what horror convulsed his features! No longer could he call to his aid that desperate brutal callousness with which he had nerved himself before closing his eyes in slumber during the past night. No!—for he was now keenly alive to all the renewed terrors of his position. For awhile he abandoned himself to the agony of his feelings; and tears came from his eyes. It was not the first time that wretch whose soul was stained with a thousand misdeeds, had wept in the midst of an Indian jungle. But at length he suddenly cursed himself for his weakness; and he looked with straining eyes around, in the hope of discovering where the wild scenery might gradually grow less savage or altogether cease. But he could discern no issue from the wilderness. He strove to find the marks of his footsteps, that by retracing them his aim should be accomplished. Herein again he failed; and as he stood there, in the midst of that jungle, he had no earthly conception from which point of the compass he had entered it. If he were to wander on in the hope of finding the means of egress, he might only be plunging deeper and deeper into a wilderness which his imagination, guided by past experience, depicted as full of horrors. Every source of apprehension belonging to that past experience, in connexion with the frightful circumstances of an Indian jungle, was now again opened up to his fevered fancy. The wretch was famishing; and yet he forgot his hunger amidst the agitation of his thoughts.

Either to find an issue from that place or to perish in the attempt—these were now the alternatives which once again he had before him. He wandered on, avoiding as well as he was able the long grass, on account of the venomous reptiles—and the trees on account of the boa constrictor. At length he beheld a shrub laden with fruits, such as he had seen in the markets of towns and villages, and in the gardens belonging to farmhouses. He therefore felt assured that they were not poisonous, even though growing in their wild state: but he knew not their name. He ate greedily of those fruits; and when he had thus appeased his hunger and thirst, he filled his wallet with them. Then he continued his way; and for two or three hours he wandered on in the scarcely tolerable heat of the scorching sun,—not daring to seek the shade of the trees, and vainly looking about for some cavern wherein to shelter himself.

Slowly and painfully he progressed, finding no issue from that jungle,—wondering whether he were plunging deeper and deeper into it,—and wondering likewise whether it were the same of

which his former experiences were so hideous and so horrible. Perhaps, he thought to himself, his circuitous wanderings might possibly have brought him back into that same terrible maze; and he almost wished that it was so, for he fancied that if he could find his way to the cavern, he might thence remember the direction which had led him to an issue into a place of safety. Thus he wandered on and on, endeavouring to buoy himself up with hope—but nevertheless having the sickening conviction that it was feeble indeed. He grew more and more desponding: he found it to be in vain to struggle against the despair which was growing upon him—hemming him in closer and closer—narrowing the circle which for a little while he had managed to keep at a distance. He felt like a doomed man: a presentiment that his hour approached, was creeping upon him—stealing into his soul—gnawing as it were into his heart's core—making the perspiration feel colder and more clammy upon his brow and all over his form, despite the torrid sunbeams that poured their full glare upon him as he dragged his weary limbs along. It was thus in this wretched frame of mind that the Burker pursued his way through the jungle: but the catastrophe was near at hand. He presently fancied that he discovered something like a beaten path; and for a few moments joy sprang up in his soul. But the seeming path was suddenly lost in the midst of tall rank herbage, where stood a solitary tree. Though hitherto so careful to avoid the neighbourhood of trees, yet the Burker disregarded on this occasion his wonted caution: for he thought that the path might be only encumbered by the thickets of weeds and bushes, and that it might be continued on the other side. He was pursuing his way, when quick as the lightning-flash leaps forth from the storm-cloud, a tremendous snake sprang down from the tree, and more quickly than the eye can wink, the wretched man was enfolded in the awful prisonage of its coils.

Oh, what a wild cry of agony rang through the jungle! But here our description must stop short: we cannot enter deliberately into the painful details of that wretched criminal's sufferings, both mental and physical, which lasted for many hours, until the huge reptile with its constricting power crushed the breath out of its victim's body.

CHAPTER CLXIII.

INDERABAD.

QUEEN INDORA and her royal husband were making a tour of their dominions, at the time the magnificent procession passed like a gorgeous panorama before the view of the concealed English fugitive. It was Indora's object to introduce her consort to the principal cities and towns of the Kingdom of Inderabad, and at the same time to receive the memorials and petitions of those of her subjects who had representations to make or grievances to complain of. She and her husband travelled with the accustomed pomp of oriental potentates,—not that they themselves were flattered by this display of ostentation and ceremony, but because they considered it expedient to follow the course that was in accordance with the habits, manners, and prejudices of the country. At every town which they visited, the municipal authorities prepared the most welcome reception for the royal travellers; and this was no false nor hollow parade of sycophantic feelings—but it was the sincere enthusiasm of persons who were satisfied with their rulers. Those very municipal corporations themselves owed their existence to the enlightened policy which Indora's husband, when plain Clement Redcliffe, had recommended for the adoption of the King of Inderabad; and thus all those town-councillors pressed forward with a genuine feeling of gratitude to welcome the personage to whose enlightened advice they were indebted for the civic privilege of self-government. Nor less were they enthusiastic in their welcome of that lady who had raised to her side upon the throne the man whose name had for years past been idolized in Inderabad—the enlightened English reformer to whose policy that kingdom owed the liberty of its institutions and the spirit of strict justice which animated the execution of its laws.

The royal tour was a series of pageants, festivities, and rejoicings. From the palatial mansion to the humblest cottage the effect of the liberal policy which Indora's husband had in times past initiated, was everywhere felt; and in the breasts of all grades beat hearts that were full of enthusiasm, for their intelligent King and his grandly handsome wife. In every city and town a High Court was held, at which all memorials and petitions were received: but few were the complaints brought under the cognisance of their Majesties. In these rare instances where it *did* occur, the minutest investigation took place; and chastisement was inflicted on the offending authorities. The manner in which justice was thus distributed, enhanced the admiration already experienced by the people for their illustrious rulers; and the judges, magistrates, and other functionaries of the law were taught the lesson that as their good conduct was certain to be rewarded, any dereliction on their part was on the other hand equally sure to be detected and punished.

It was the determination of Queen Indora and her royal husband that Inderabad should be rendered the model state of Hindostan;—that all its internal resources should be developed to the utmost, not for the mere benefit of a few, but for the advantage of the many. According to old prejudice, there were still some few offices which were hereditary in particular families: but this system was completely abolished; and all those situations were thrown open to the general competition of merit. Schools were established, and a good national system of education was founded. In short, every measure was taken to ensure the welfare, the prosperity, and the happiness of the millions over whom Queen Indora and her husband ruled so carefully and so well.

When the tour was completed, the royal procession returned to the capital. It was a grand day for Inderabad,—that one on which the whole population of the city poured forth to welcome the return of their King and Queen. These illustrious personages were received with the loudest acclamations; and here again the enthusiasm was all genuine: it was not the false, hollow, motiveless, and unmerited adulation which attends upon the progress of Royalty in other countries of the world, especially in those of Europe.

And now let us look into the interior of the palace at Inderabad. There we shall behold the Queen and her illustrious consort seated upon their thrones, in the great audience-hall, giving an affable and gracious reception to all the high dignitaries of the kingdom, to the councillors, the judges, and the magistrates; and receiving such recommendations or suggestions as each in his own special department might have to offer. And all those dignitaries appeared to be inspired with the same enlightened views and intentions which animated their Sovereigns. If they saw opportunities of effecting improvements or legitimate economies in the departments over which they presided, they manifested the most enlightened zeal to take the initiative of their own accord, instead of waiting until public clamour demanded ameliorations or insisted upon the abolition of abuses. It was no mere meaningless levee which those Sovereigns thus held: it had good business-purposes in view; and Queen Indora as well as her husband felt, when the reception was concluded, that they had not sat upon thrones as idols to receive an adulation which should be offered to God alone, and which is impious when offered to mere mortals,—but that the hours they devoted to the ceremony were fraught with real sterling benefit to their subjects.

The audience being finished, the King and Queen retired awhile to their own private apartments; and thither we will follow the splendid Indora. We shall now find her seated in an elegantly-furnished boudoir, attended by half-a dozen of her ladies, with whom she conversed upon intellectual topics. The most serious sage might have been a listener without finding his common sense outraged or his soul disgusted by any frivolities on the part of that beauteous bevy. Presently the Queen bethought herself of something; and she gave instructions to one of her ladies,—who immediately retired to execute it. In about half-an-hour a young woman, in an European dress, was introduced into the boudoir; and she threw herself upon her knees at the feet of the Queen.

"Rise, Amy," said her Majesty: and then she made a sign for all her ladies to retire. "Sit down by my side," continued Indora; "and tell me how fares it now with your sister Marion?—how has she borne herself during the three months of my absence on my tour through my kingdom?"

"Your Majesty may judge by my countenance," replied Amy Sutton, with a tone and look of the deepest gratitude, "whether I have reason to be rejoiced at the conduct of my sister Marion. I feel convinced that she is thoroughly reformed—that she is completely penitent for her past errors—and that no temptation could now possibly draw her aside from the path of virtue."

"This is indeed gladdening intelligence, Amy," said Indora. "And your sister is still pleased with the secluded residence which I allotted to you both?"

"Oh! call it not secluded," exclaimed Miss Sutton, in a tone of grateful enthusiasm, "when it possesses every charm to render it agreeable. How could Marion be otherwise than satisfied with such a sweet spot? A picturesque villa—situated in the midst of a delicious garden, abounding in all the choicest fruits and flowers of this oriental clime——Oh! how deep a debt of gratitude do we both owe to your Majesty and to your illustrious consort the King!"

"I am well rewarded for anything I have done for you both," replied Indora, "by finding that you are grateful—by seeing that you are happy—and by hearing that your sister is so completely reformed. I promised you, Amy, that whenever the day came that you could positively and truthfully assure me of this reformation on your sister's part, I would grant her an audience. Go and conduct her hither."

For a moment there seemed to be some little hesitation and confusion on Amy Sutton's part; and while the blushes were still upon her cheeks, she said, "May it please your Majesty, both myself and my sister have formed a few acquaintances; and amongst them——"

"I think," interrupted Indora, smiling, "that I can penetrate your meaning: and if so, I may save you the confusion of further avowals. It is natural enough!—that is, if my surmise be correct. You have formed acquaintances — and amongst them are doubtless two young men who have not beheld with indifference the good looks of Amy and Marion Sutton. Is it not so?"

"It is, your Majesty," replied the young woman, her cheeks still suffused with blushes.

"And who are these young men?" asked the Queen, her countenance gradually becoming serious.

Amy Sutton replied to the question.

"A Captain and a Lieutenant in the Royal Guard," continued the Queen; "and I happen to recollect them both. Yes—they are good-looking young men. But have you reflected, Amy——"

"Gracious Queen," responded the young woman, "they know everything! Yesterday they simultaneously avowed their sentiments; and I frankly explained to them all the antecedents of my sister and myself. Nothing did I conceal—neither the outrage which had robbed me of my honour—nor the temptations to which Marion had succumbed."

"And what said these young men?" asked Indora.

"I told them, may it please your Majesty," continued Amy, "of all your great kindness towards us both, and of the opportunity which you had afforded my sister of reforming her conduct. I assured them that Marion was indeed deeply penitent. In a word, may it please your Majesty, they will espouse us if we have your gracious permission."

"And that permission will not be refused, Amy," rejoined the Queen. "Some such idea as this I had certainly entertained: indeed I was in hope that you would comfortably settle in my dominions. There must be forgiveness for the erring who are truly penitent; and thus Marion must be forgiven! Go to her—bring her hither—and let me see your contrite sister."

Amy Sutton departed; and in a short time she returned, accompanied by Marion. The latter—so full-blown a beauty in her own native clime—had lost somewhat of the rich luxuriance of her charms: but it seemed as if it were only the meretricious glow that had passed away, leaving her more serious-looking and with the air of one who was now more accustomed to commune with herself. She threw herself at the Queen's feet, and pressed to her lips the royal hand which she moistened with her tears. The Queen bade her rise: she spoke kindly and encouragingly to her; and she gave her excellent advice, without the formality of a severe lecture. It was rather as a friend than with the authority of a Sovereign that Queen Indora thus spoke; and her words produced a powerful effect upon the young woman. At length the two sisters retired, with the assurance that their welfare should ever be watched over by Queen Indora.

If we were to glance into another part of the royal palace, we should find a steady-looking, but a contented and cheerful European, seated in a large comfortable apartment, with a quantity of papers before him. At his right hand upon the table stands an iron cash-box; and the lid being open, its glittering contents of gold and silver are revealed. One after another the domestics of the Royal Household enter this apartment, to receive their monthly salaries, as well as to render an account of the respective offices which they fill. The Englishman speaks the native language with facility: he maintains the proper dignity of a superior official: but there is no undue pride about him—nothing that savours of arrogance in his manner: he is calm and business-like, with a kind word for every one who merits his approbation. He evidently occupies a post of the highest trust and confidence: he holds no mean rank in the royal palace; for the oriental costume which he wears is rich, and he is treated with the utmost respect by those who thus in their turn seek his presence. For this personage is none other than the faithful Mark, now Intendant of the Royal Household in the palace of Inderabad.

Let us look into another apartment in that same palatial dwelling; and we shall find the King, also seated at his desk; and his Majesty is busied with a variety of official documents, as well as with other correspondence. It is his private cabinet to which we thus introduce our reader: it is splendidly furnished; and on one side there is an array of shelves covered with volumes belonging to the best literature of the European nations. Presently Queen Indora enters; and a smile immediately appears on the countenance of her husband as he rises to welcome her. She seats herself by his side; and she tells him all that has just taken place with the two English sisters.

"You have acted kindly and wisely, as you always do, my beloved Indora," answered the King, gazing with mingled affection and admiration upon the gloriously handsome countenance of his splendid Queen. "I know those officers: they are steady, well-conducted young men; and you will perceive, my Indora," continued his Majesty, taking up a paper from a pile upon his desk, "that according to the recommendation of their Colonel, I had placed their names upon this list for speedy promotion. I will see them to-morrow; and they shall assuredly wed these young women of their choice."

The Queen was gratified to find that the project experienced her husband's approval: and the King proceeded to say, "The courier has just arrived with the European letters; and here are a number from our friends in the West. Look, Indora! these are for you: I recognise the writing of my sweet young relative Christina. And here are two or three from Christian to myself. Let us read, and then compare notes."

For some little time the royal couple were occupied with their correspondence; and when they had concluded, they again looked at each other.

"Christian tells me," said the King, "that he has every reason to believe my young friend Stanley—whose father, by the bye, has been created a Peer—is making an impression upon the heart of Christina."

"Oh! then, I see, that you are not more than half in the secret, Bertram!" replied Indora, with a gay and cheerful smile; "for the amiable Christina has written me several long letters, in which she frankly explains her feelings towards Major Stanley——and in short she loves him."

"Ah! is it so?" ejaculated the King. "Then I am indeed truly delighted!"

"I always felt convinced," said Queen Indora, "that so well-principled, pure-minded, and excellent a girl as Christina would triumph successfully over the hallucination which for a time had taken possession of her in respect to Lord Octavian."

"Ah! there is a postscript to the latest of Christian's letters," exclaimed the King. "I had overlooked it! Yes—it is indeed true: the Hon. Major Stanley has been accepted by Christina."

At this moment the door of the royal cabinet opened; and an official made his appearance.

"Tidings, may it please your Majesties, have just reached Inderabad," said the official,—"hideous and horrible tidings they are too—relative to that Englishman who escaped some time ago from one of the State prisons."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the King: "has a criminal's righteous doom in some way overtaken that wretch at last?"

"A doom, sire, the most fearful—the most terrible!" replied the official. "It appears that three or four wandering Gossoons were passing through a jungle in the neighbouring State—they were on their way to a cavern, to which, as I understand, they occasionally retire when pretending to withdraw themselves from the world for purposes of self-mortification; and while traversing that jungle, they beheld a frightful spectacle. The Englishman, still alive, was enfolded in the coils of a monstrous reptile. One of the Gossoons happened to know something of him, I believe: he had seen him before, in the very cavern to which I am alluding——"

"And you say that the wretch still lived?" asked the King, while horror was depicted on his own countenance as well as on that of the Queen.

"Yes, sire—he still lived," rejoined the official. "I have just had the tale from the lips of the Gossoons themselves; and by the description of the man, it is unquestionably the same who escaped from Inderabad. On beholding those Gossoons, he implored them in the most piteous manner to help him. But what could they do? They had no fire-arms; and even while the wretch was shrieking forth in his agony, the coils of the horrible reptile were constricting all the more tightly around him."

"Frightful though the man's death must have been," said the King, shuddering visibly, "it is not cruel nor uncharitable to declare that it was only an adequate retribution for the appalling crimes of which, to our certain knowledge, he has been guilty."

The official withdrew; and the King, following up the spirit of his former observations, said to the Queen, "So true it is, my beloved Indora, that there is punishment in this world for the wicked, and that sooner or later God's vengeance will alight upon their heads!"

CHAPTER CLXIV.

THE EXECUTION.

HORSEMONGER LANE GAOL is the County Prison for Surrey; and therefore persons committing penal offences on the southern side of the Thames, are committed to that sinister establishment instead of to Newgate.

In a condemned cell at that Surrey prison we shall find Barbara Smedley. She had been convicted at the Central Criminal Court, on the clearest evidence, of having been an accomplice in the murder of Joseph Preston at the little house which she and her husband, together with her mother, Mrs. Webber, occupied at the time in Lambeth. The wretched woman knew that there was no earthly hope for her; and yet she seemed most impenitent. When she stood in the dock and was asked the usual question why sentence of death should not be pronounced, she had insolently pleaded that inasmuch as her husband, who was a participator in the same crime, had only been condemned to transportation for life, it would be "a burning shame" to send her to the scaffold. The Judge considerately remonstrated with her,—representing that her husband had availed himself of a special offer made by the Government, and by giving the great criminal Barnes into custody, he had obtained that mercy which was promised in the placard issued by the Secretary of State. Still Mrs Smedley reasoned with a bold hardihood against the judge's argument,—vowing that as long as her husband was suffered to live, it would be nothing short of downright murder to inflict the extreme penalty upon herself. Sentence was however pronounced; and when the awful judgment of the law was delivered, Bab Smedley was borne shrieking, yelling, and vociferating horribly, from the dock.

She was now in Horsemonger Lane Gaol—in a chamber formed of massive masonry, and with huge iron bars at the window. This window looked upon a passage that was well watched; and thus, even if she removed the bars, escape would be next to impossible. Remove those bars indeed! Many a strong vigorous man had been in that same cell, under a similar sentence, and there had been no escape. Could she—a comparatively weak feeble woman—do that which the powerful arms of stalwart men could not accomplish? No, no!—She knew that she could not: she had neither saw nor file—she had not so much as a nail wherewith to work!

The door was massive: the walls were of a thickness that defied penetration. She was as if entombed in a sepulchre! And yet the threshold of the grave had not yet been passed by her: she was still living—living to endure a terrible death! Did remorse strike her? No: she experienced not compunction for the crimes of which she had been guilty: but she gnashed her teeth with rage—and her eyes glared—and her form quivered with fury—and she clenched her fists until the nails almost penetrated into the flesh,—at the idea that the world, as she termed it, had got the better of her and that the law had mastered her.

The chaplain visited her, and endeavoured to reason her into a better frame of mind: but she listened sullenly and gloomily. She did not choose to display her fiercer passions in the presence of the reverend gentleman, for fear lest he should report her as insubordinate, and she might be subjected to even a sterner coercion than that which she experienced. But when the chaplain had quitted her cell, she laughed scornfully: it was like the mocking laugh of a fiend. The truths of religion had not touched her: death had no terrors for her in respect to the world which lies beyond the grave. It was only on account of the fact of being cut short in the midst of her earthly career, that she felt so deeply; and this depth of feeling was as far removed from true contrition as the poles are asunder. It was, as the reader has seen, the malicious fury of a fiend—the concentrated rage of a demoness—in having been triumphed over by the world and the law.

She was allowed to take a little exercise, either in a courtyard at stated hours, or in the passage communicating with her own cell. She preferred the latter. She did not want, she said, to be made a spectacle to the other prisoners: it was enough to have to look forward to the day when she would become a spectacle for thousands in all the neighbourhood of the gaol.

There were several other cells in the same array with her own, opening into the same passage. These cells were allotted to female prisoners who had committed very serious offences. A couple of days after Bab Smedley's condemnation—and while she was walking to and fro in the passage—the iron gate at the end was opened to give admission to some new prisoner. This was an elderly woman, who was so overcome by grief and was weeping so bitterly, that she had to be sustained by the turnkey who was conducting her in.

"Another candidate for up aloft?" asked Bab Smedley, thus alluding to the scaffold: for at Horsemonger Lane Gaol public executions take place on the roof of the main building.

"Not quite so bad as that," answered the turnkey, disgusted with the flippant hardihood of the condemned woman, and yet not choosing to speak harshly to her from the fact that she *was* condemned.

"Well, what is it, then?" demanded Bab: and without waiting for a reply, she said to the new prisoner, "Come, my good dame, it's no use whimpering here. All the tears in the world won't melt down these walls or soften the iron bars."

"Oh, my heavens! to think that it should have happened at last!" moaned the new prisoner, with bitterest lamentations, as she wrung her hands in despair; and Bab Smedley now discovered that she was a foreign woman from the peculiarity of her accent. "That villain Shadbolt——"

"Ah! he is safe under lock and key likewise—if that's any consolation to you," said the gaol official.

"I know it!" exclaimed Madame Angelique—for she the new prisoner was; "and it is the only consolation! To think that I should have been so mad!"—and she again gave way to her lamentations.

She was now consigned to a cell; and the turnkey locked her in, because the prison-rules would not permit the condemned captive Barbara Smedley to hold conversation with any other inmate.

"Who is she? and what has she done?" asked Bab Smedley of the turnkey.

"She was once a famous milliner—and something else too—at the West End of the town," replied the turnkey. "She retired, as everybody thought, on a good fortune—and had a beautiful villa at Brixton. But a little while ago she seemed suddenly to lose the best part of all she had—that is to say if she ever had it: and she took up with a fellow named Shadbolt, who was once in the detective force. A precious scamp he is—though I daresay that this Frenchwoman knew a trick or two, and didn't require much temptation to lead her to do what she has done."

"And what is that?" asked Bab Smedley.

"Just a little bit of forgery," responded the turnkey. "Of course having been in such a good way of business, the Frenchwoman was pretty well acquainted with the signatures of many noblemen and rich gentlemen who used to pay their wives' bills by means of cheques; and perhaps she might have had some of their letters by her. However, let that be as it may, she and this Shadbolt tried to make up a good purse before bolting off together to France or America, or heaven knows where. So they manufactured three or four cheques; they got the money for a couple—they were found out when presenting the third—and now they've been committed for trial."

"And that will be transportation for life," observed Bab Smedley.

"Just so," replied the turnkey, as he unlocked the gate at the end of the passage to let himself out.

"Well, for my part," rejoined Bab, "I'd sooner cut one caper and have done with it off-hand."

The turnkey flung a look of pity upon the hardened woman: but he perceived that her attempt to smile was a hideously sickly one—and he knew therefore that though she pretended she would rather suffer death than be doomed to transportation for life, yet that in her own heart she envied the comparatively happy position of Madame Angelique. We may here remind the reader that the Frenchwoman had lost the greater portion of the ill-gotten gains of her former mode of life, by having been compelled to assign them to charitable institutions according to the decree which Queen Indora had pronounced from the judgment seat in the memorable tribunal at Oaklands. In a fit of desperation Madame Angelique had subsequently thrown herself entirely into the hands of the unprincipled scoundrel Shadbolt; and the reader has now seen the result of this fatal intimacy. The idea which had so often haunted her—namely, that of finding herself in a criminal prison—was now realised; and she knew that her doom would be transportation. Much altered was she during the last few months. She had lost her *embonpoint*: she had grown comparatively thin: her looks were haggard—her cheeks all the more so through the absence of the rouge that was wont to colour them: her eyes were sunken and hollow: some of her false teeth were gone. As for the state of her mind, it was more horrible than we can possibly describe: for she had but a very vague idea of what transportation actually meant—and through this very ignorance she was all the more terrified, as in imagination she realised it. She pictured to herself gangs of felons, female as well as male, working together in chains—in the midst of swamps swarming with reptiles, or of forests rendered hideous by the howling of wild beasts: she shuddered at the fearful long voyage across the seas: in short, the ex-milliner of a fashionable region of the West End was now as abject and miserable a wretch as any unfortunate vagrant whom she had ever turned away from her door.

When locked up in the gloomy cell—that cell which even in the middle of summer seemed to strike a cold horror deep down to her very vitals—she threw herself on the hard pallet, and gave way to her grief. She did not hear that there was a loud knock at the little trap in the huge massive door; and that knock was repeated several times before it aroused Madame Angelique from the woful condition into which she was plunged. At length she heard it; and starting up, she hastened to open the little trap. The woman whom she had seen in the passage, now met her view.

"Come," she said, "what's the use of your taking on like this? It won't mend matters, I suppose; and why can't you and I have a little companionable discourse?—as I daresay we sha'n't be very long allowed to be neighbours together."

"Who are you? and what have *you* done?" inquired Madame Angelique. "But tell me!" she added, with a shudder: "where is that woman who was condemned to death two days ago? I hope in the name of heaven she is not near us! I should dream of nothing but gibbets and scaffolds——"

"Don't be a fool!" interjected Bab Smedley, who could not prevent her countenance from assuming a ghastly look. "Should you like to see the woman?"

"No——yes!" replied Madame Angelique. "Yes, yes! I should like to see one who must be more miserable than myself: for there would be a consolation even in *that!*"

"Don't make so sure," rejoined Bab Smedley, "that the woman you speak of is so uncommonly miserable——"

"Not miserable!" cried Madame Angelique. "Good heavens——"

"Hush!—not so loud! We shall be overheard by those scamps of turnkeys; and they will pretty soon make us hold our tongues!"

"You at all events seem to take your lot carelessly enough," said Madame Angelique, now speaking in a low voice again; and it was with a species of envy that she contemplated this woman who to outward appearance was so indifferent to the fact of being the inmate of a gaol. "I suppose you are not going to remain here long?"

"No—not long," replied Barbara Smedley: but it now struck Madame Angelique that she had a strange look. "My time's up next Monday week."

"So soon?" ejaculated the ex-milliner: and she heaved a deep sigh of envy.

"Yes—so soon," rejoined Mrs. Smedley.

Madame Angelique's attention was now more than ever riveted upon the woman's countenance, over which their appeared to sweep a look of such wild intense horror that it seemed to indicate anything but a real callousness or indifference. A strange suspicion began to hover in the mind of the ex-milliner: for she recollected that the recently condemned murderess was to be executed on Monday week; and the coincidence of this woman's statement relative to the period of her own liberation, together with that look which had just swept over her features, engendered the idea that she herself might possibly be the doomed wretch.

"You wanted to see the woman who is to be hanged," said Barbara, affecting a laugh—but it was hollow, and died into a sepulchral gurgle in her throat; "and here she is!"

"You?" ejaculated Madame Angelique: for even now she could scarcely believe her ears.

"Yes—I!" responded Bab Smedley, exerting every effort to maintain an air of bravado. "And why not? I suppose I have had my day; and I may as well go next Monday week as live on. The turnkey told me you were safe to be transported; and I consider myself a happier woman than you. Why, sooner than I would be sent out of the country in a dreadful convict-ship, to endure all sorts of horrors, I would mount the scaffold cheerfully."

"No!" said Madame Angelique: "you are deceiving me—you have not the slightest advantage over me! I am happier than you! You know it—you feel it! It is a useless endeavour on your part to persuade yourself——"

"Don't tell me that!—don't dare speak to me in such a way!" cried Barbara Smedley; "or I will tear your eyes out:"—and her features became livid, not entirely with rage, but with the intense horror of her thoughts as she keenly felt the truth of all that the Frenchwoman had been just saying to her.

Madame Angelique was frightened at Barbara Smedley's appearance: she looked as if she were a tiger-cat about to fly at her; and the ex-milliner closed the little trap in the massive door.

Shortly afterwards the turnkey came to lock Bab Smedley up in her cell again; and the miserable woman felt a despondency was creeping over her,—a despondency which she could not possibly shake off—a depression which defied all her efforts to struggle against. She endeavoured to sing—to hum a tune—to force her lips to repeat aloud the declaration that she would sooner be executed on the scaffold than condemned to transportation: but all was of no avail. Misery of mind was growing upon her apace,—till at length she sat down upon the pallet in her cell, and gave way to her reflections.

But it was when night came, and she was in the utter darkness of this cell, that her thoughts grew the most harrowing. There she was, in the full vigour of life—in a few days to become a corpse! She would be placed in a coffin; and the horrible idea stole into her brain that when in that coffin she would have the suffocating sense of knowing that she was *there*. She could not fancy that this life which was now so vigorous, could so utterly pass away as to leave her inanimate as a marble statue—unsusceptible of whatsoever she was now enabled to feel, to know, or to think of. With such thoughts as these she writhed and tossed upon her bed: she pressed her hands to her brows to subdue the terrible activity of her brain; and then she strove to settle herself to sleep:—but hours passed ere slumber stole upon her eyes.

Ah! what was this?—why was the door opening? and who was now stealing in? Was it indeed the turnkey's voice that bade her speak low as he bent over her couch, and told her that he had come to save her? Could she possibly believe him? Oh, if there were a light that she might distinguish his countenance in order to discern whether he were mocking her or not! He bids her rise and hastily huddle on her clothes—but to be sure and not make the slightest noise, for fear lest an alarm should be raised and the proceedings should be discovered. Oh, how eager for freedom is she now!—but in the strong suspense, the wild hope, and the tremendous fear which she experiences, she trembles so that she can scarcely put on her apparel. At length it is done; and she follows the turnkey from the cell. She is in the passage:—even the air of that stone corridor, though 'tis still within the prison-walls, seems to inspire her lungs with the vivifying freshness of freedom's atmosphere. The turnkey unlocks the iron gate. Why is he thus befriending her? why is he risking everything on his own account to save her from the gallows? She knows not; and her thoughts grow confused as she tries to conjecture. But at all events he is sincere—and that is sufficient: for he is performing his promise—he is guiding her to freedom. They thread the stone passages: they walk on tiptoe—their garments rustle not—they proceed with the stealthiness of ghosts. Her kind friend, whose generosity is so unaccountable, possesses the key of every door that stands betwixt herself and freedom; and each is opened in its turn. How favourable are all circumstances!—no other official of the gaol appears—no one comes forward to offer the slightest molestation nor to bar their way; and thus the court-yard is reached. It is traversed——Ah! now they are at the great gates of the building. But what will the friendly turnkey do? how can he contrive to open them? But strange!—the porter does not come forth; and her generous guide has got the keys of these gates likewise. The wicket opens—she passes out—she turns to thank him—but he is gone. And now she forgets precisely what turning she takes to get away from the dreadful prison she has just left: but she finds herself groping along through lanes and alleys which get narrower and darker, and less practicable the further she proceeds. It is as if she were in a maze which becomes more and more bewildering the deeper she plunges into it. She is frightened: her liberty seems to be of no use to her: she has an appalling sense of progressing nearer and nearer to some terrific danger which will suddenly overwhelm her. And yet she must continue to flounder on through the intense darkness; for to turn back is to retrace her way to the prison whence she has escaped. All of a sudden a hand is laid upon her shoulder—myriads of lights spring up around her—the narrow alley through which she was groping her way swarms with constables—her name is vociferated——and she wakes, to find it all a dream!

Heaven alone could tell how long this dream had lasted: but whether it had endured for a space equivalent to that which the incidents themselves seemed to occupy, or whether all its elaborated details had actually been condensed into a far more limited compass in respect to time,—certain it is that the woman had been dragged through all the variations of the strong feelings, emotions, and sensations that could have veritably pertained to the progress of realities. So exhausting was the influence of all she had thus felt, and so overpowering was the crowning disappointment, that she lay for some time as if unable to move. The light of morning was glimmering in at the barred window; and the configuration of the vaulted cell, as well as the few objects that were in it, were discernible with sufficient clearness to convince her that she was really the inmate of a dungeon, and that it was no horrible hallucination which her fevered brain had conjured up. Yes—she was a condemned woman; and she was to perish on the gibbet!

Day after day now passed; and she saw no more of Madame Angelique: for the Frenchwoman was afraid of her, and would not open the trap-door when she knew that Barbara Smedley was taking exercise in the passage. The chaplain continued to visit her; but she still showed no contrition. She was very, very miserable—but not penitent. Her hardihood was breaking—but not in the right sense. It was leaving her a prey to horror, to anguish, to the direst alarms—we might even say to an excruciation of mental agonies: but still it awakened not in her a true sense of the awful position in which she was placed.

Her time was drawing on: day after day was going by: one more day was past—the fatal one, as it approached, was assuming a hideous substantiality, like a spectral form emerging from a mist and taking colossal proportions. Still there was no penitence. Of wretchedness and woe, of deepest depression and profoundest despondency—of all these was she the prey: but she had no true remorse. The Sunday came on which what is called "the condemned sermon" was to be preached; and the chaplain delivered a discourse which he hoped might touch her heart. She rocked herself to and fro in the condemned pew; and when the ceremony was over, she was so weak and faint that she had to lean on the arm of a turnkey to get back to her cell. Then the chaplain visited her: but he found her still impenetrable to the feelings with which he piously sought to imbue her. She had now a matron or nurse remaining altogether with her: for an apprehension was entertained that in her desponding condition she might attempt suicide. Oh, what a glorious illustration of the merciful nature of our law, which takes such zealous care of those whom it is about to hang!

The hours went by: and though she did nothing to beguile the time—opened no book, conversed not with the matron, nor on this day took exercise in the passage—yet did the minutes flit past as if on the wings of a hurricane: for the nearer her doom approached, the more quickly went the time. Just when she would have had it drag itself along as if with leaden feet, it flew past her with the speed of a race-horse!

It was not until a late hour that she put off her apparel and lay down on her pallet. She had sat up and kept awake as long as she could, in order that she should not be cheated by slumber of the time that yet remained for her to live. So exhausted was she by the harrowing emotions that raged within her, that sleep almost immediately visited her eyes; and thus she slept for some hours,—a dreamless sleep so far as she understood it—but yet a feverish one, as the vigilant matron perceived that it was.

But, Ah! what ominous sounds are those which now break upon the ears of the condemned woman? A candle is burning dimly in the cell; and she starts up in affright. She listens: there is a hammering—a knocking: carpenters are at work. She comprehends what it is: the scaffold is being erected on the roof of the gaol! Each blow of the hammer seems to strike upon her very brain: every fresh sound appears to touch a chord thrilling with horrible coldness to her very heart's core. The matron endeavours to direct her attention to the more serious duty of preparing to receive the chaplain; for it is now past five o'clock in the morning, and the reverend gentleman is expected. But the condemned woman hears her not: all her thoughts seem to be riveted in an appalled manner upon those sounds that reverberate so dull, so heavy, and with such ominous reiteration through the cell.

The chaplain made his appearance: but on finding that the prisoner was still in bed, he retired for a short time, while she rose and apparelled herself. This she did mechanically, at the suggestion of the matron; and then the chaplain returned. She listened to him with eyes expressive of a dreamy vacancy: she appeared not to comprehend what he was saying, but only to be conscious of the droning sound of a human voice in her ears. Thus nearly two hours passed; and then the matron, who had retired for a time, brought in the condemned woman's breakfast. She ate and drank all that was set before her: but everything she now did, seemed to be marked by the listless apathy of an idiot.

At length an incident occurred which startled her into a vividly frightful sense of her appalling position. The door opened: the Governor and the Under-Sheriff entered the cell: but there was some one behind them—a man who lingered on the threshold. This was the executioner. Bab Smedley started up to her feet, her countenance convulsed with horror; and then she suddenly abandoned herself to the wildest and most passionate lamentations. When her anguish had somewhat subsided, and she had resumed her seat, the chaplain thought it a fitting opportunity to renew his well-meant ministrations: but the wretched woman listened not to him—she sat rocking herself to and fro, moaning piteously. The executioner approached: she rushed to a corner of the cell—she wildly bade him keep off, if he valued his life. Remonstrances were vain; and force had to be used in order to keep her still, while the executioner pinioned her arms in the usual manner.

Then she felt herself to be utterly powerless; and death already seemed staring her in the face. A sudden revulsion of feeling took place within her; and she implored the chaplain to speak words of consolation. He did his duty, according to the manner in which he understood it, by assuring her that there was a possibility of pardon for one who expressed and felt contrition even on the very verge of the grave; and the miserable woman now clutched eagerly at the promise. The procession was formed: it issued from the cell—and the ascent to the roof of the prison was commenced.

The top of the gaol was reached; and then, as the condemned woman flung her looks around, what a living ocean was spread before her eyes!—what countless multitudes were gathered about the place!—and all to see a fellow-creature die! She was closely attended by the chaplain; and until the instant when that mass of upturned human faces met her view, she had appeared to be listening to the words which were flowing from his lips. But now she suddenly stopped short: she gasped for breath: she would have fallen had not the Governor and the Under-Sheriff been ready to sustain her. Until her appearance upon the roof of the gaol, there had been conversation amidst the crowd—laughing, jesting, practical joking, and all those indecencies of behaviour which are characteristic of such a scene in England. But when that doomed woman emerged upon the summit of the gaol, a dead silence fell upon the multitude: it seemed as if the myriads of Babel itself had been suddenly stricken dumb. The voice of the chaplain was clearly audible to a considerable distance; and the prison-bell was tolling the knell of her who was about to die.

Yes—the burial-service was being said, and the knell was being tolled, for one who was yet alive—one who, if pardon were at that instant accorded, might yet live on for many a long, long year!—for one who had no mortal sickness that had brought her to the verge of the grave, but who physically was hale, hearty, and strong, with all life's principles potent and unimpaired within her, and who in respect to age was only in her prime! Yet was she already treated as one who belonged no more to this world—one who was already dead—an animated corpse, proceeding by some strange mechanism towards the gibbet, where for one whole hour by the clock she was to be ignominiously suspended. And thus for *her* the service for the dead was being recited—the solemn knell was being tolled!

And amidst that multitude of myriads congregated in the neighbourhood of the gaol—pressing hard up against the barricades—densely packed in every street, court, and alley whence a glimpse could be obtained of death's hideous paraphernalia—covering the house-tops—even mounted upon the very chimneys themselves;—amidst this mighty assemblage, we say, there were beings of her own sex—females who had come to witness her execution, just in the same way that they would flock to a pageant or a fair—to witness the Sovereign open Parliament, to feast their eyes upon the Lord Mayor's Show, or to treat themselves with a trip to Greenwich on Whit-Monday. Oh!—and what was more hideous still, many of those women had children in their arms. Frightful inoculation from the foulness of the gallows for that youthful offspring!—terrible infection for the juvenile progeny, from that enormous and loathsome plague-spot upon the civilisation of this country!

The wretched woman ascended the few steps leading to the platform of the gibbet—the Chaplain on one side, the Under-Sheriff on the other—the executioner immediately behind—the Governor and some other officials of the prison a little way in the rear. O heaven! what a haggard, ghastly look—how full of deep ineffable horror that glance, which the doomed woman threw upward to the black ominous cross-beam and the chain with the hook that was dangling there to receive the noose of the halter which was already tied around her neck! She could no longer sustain herself by her own voluntary power: she was supported by those who attended on her last moments. The executioner—one of the expertest professors of the diabolical art of strangulation as applied to his fellow-creatures—a man who had most successfully graduated in this science, and whose experiences were associated with the tragic ends of all the great criminals who for the past dozen or twenty years had suffered death by the law's vengeance in this country,—the executioner, we say, was not long at his fearful work. He placed the woman on the very centre of the drop: in a moment the halter was attached to the chain: in the twinkling of an eye the knot was so accurately turned under the left ear that it should press upon a vital part; and then the sinister form of the executioner disappeared as suddenly as if he had melted into thin air. He had this faculty of gliding ghost-like away from the platform the very moment his horrible preliminaries were accomplished: but it was only to penetrate beneath that platform, to do all the rest!

The finger of the executioner drew back the bolt which sustained the drop: it fell—and the doomed woman, after struggling fearfully for a few minutes, ceased to exist. For one hour, by the clock—as appointed by the Sheriffs—did the body hang: for that whole hour did the gathered multitudes remain to gaze upon it;—and then once more did the executioner make his appearance upon the platform. This time it was to cut down the corpse, and lower it into the coffin which had been placed beneath the drop to receive it. Then workmen speedily came to remove the gibbet: the crowd melted away—the pickpockets glided off with their booty—and for the remainder of that fatal Monday all the public-houses in the neighbourhood did an excellent business. Doubtless some of the publicans thought of the old adage—"that it is an ill wind which blows nobody any good:"—and perhaps, if the truth were known, many of them would not have been very much displeased to have a hanging in the neighbourhood every Monday morning.

CONCLUSION.

Before laying down the pen in respect to the present narrative, it only remains for us to record a few last particulars concerning some of the most prominent characters who have figured upon the stage of our story.

The young Duke of Marchmont led the lovely Isabella Vincent to the altar; and a happy day was it which united this youthful pair whose attachment had been marked by so much constancy and devotion. There has been but a lapse of few years since the solemnization of this bridal: but judging from the felicity which the Duke and Duchess of Marchmont have hitherto experienced in their married state, it is only just and reasonable to argue that this same sunshine of bliss will endure until the end. There is so much congeniality in their dispositions—each possesses a heart so susceptible of the warmest and sincerest affections—both are so imbued with virtuous principles and with the purest thoughts—that it were impossible for their union to be otherwise than a happy one.

Lady Christina Vivian did not mistake the nature of her own feelings, nor miscalculate the strength of her mind, when she assured her brother at Oaklands that she had completely triumphed over the hallucination which for a time had possessed her in respect to Lord Octavian Meredith. She accepted the suit of the high-minded, the handsome, and the well-principled Robert Stanley; and in due time she accompanied him to the altar. By the recent death of his father, he has inherited the Peerage of Vandeleur; and thus all that rank, riches, and the heart's affection can possibly combine together in order to achieve the happiness of mortals, belongs to the lot of Lord and Lady Christina Vandeleur.

It is with equal pleasure that we have to report favourably of the matrimonial career of Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith since they were re-united in France. Octavian himself recovered, as Christina had done, from an hallucination which threatened to mar all his happiness; and if he thinks of the past, it is only that he may make all the more complete atonement to the amiable Zoe for the present and for the future. And, Oh! is not Zoe herself happy? Yes!—and all the more so, because this glorious sunlight of bliss was for a period so little foreseen,—at that period, we mean, when self-exiled from her home, she dwelt in the Old Chateau in the South of France. Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith returned to England shortly after the marriage of Christina; and what a happy day was that on which the two amiable friends were again locked in each other's arms. No syllable relative to the past was spoken: and yet there were looks exchanged which conveyed assurances of mutual happiness as well as pledges of imperishable amity.

An affectionate correspondence is maintained between Christian and Christina in England, and the King and Queen of Inderabad in that far-off oriental clime: and the vessels which plough the seas between the British ports and Calcutta, frequently bear choice gifts from one side to the other,—those reciprocal testimonials of a permanent and affectionate friendship! And while in England they hear of how the kingdom of Inderabad has indeed become the model State of Hindostan, the rulers of that kingdom on the other hand read from time to time, with ineffable delight, in the London newspapers which are forwarded to them, of how the Duke of Marchmont and Lord Vandeleur, Christina's husband, are distinguishing themselves in the British Senate, and how their voices are invariably raised in favour of liberty, justice, and human rights.

Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley are as happy in their marriage-state as those fond couples of which we have been speaking; and the sincerest friendship subsists between them, the Marchmonts, the Vandeleurs, and the Merediths. The happiness of Sir Edgar and Lady Beverley experienced however a passing shade, thrown by the tragic fate of Mrs. Oxenden: for steeped in iniquities though she were, Laura could not forget that she was her sister.

The reader will not have forgotten the solemn lesson delivered to Mrs. Oxenden by Queen Indora on the occasion of that memorable scene at Oaklands, when her Majesty sat upon the dread tribunal. But, as we intimated at the time, Indora's words, impressive though they were, could produce no effect upon a heart so hardened as that of Mrs. Oxenden. When liberated from Oaklands, this selfish, worldly-minded, unprincipled woman hastened back to London, and endeavoured to find her late paramour Alexis Oliver. But she soon discovered that the intimation she had received from the Queen at Oaklands was substantially correct—and that this young man, having felt the degradation of the position in which he was living upon the gold of an abandoned female, had sought, under the auspices of his forgiving family's countenance and interest, the means for carving out an honourable career for himself. Mrs. Oxenden subsequently succeeded in captivating a foreign Ambassador, who placed her in a sumptuous mansion and surrounded her with all luxuries. Her extravagances knew no bounds: but her infatuated protector, being immensely rich, ministered to them without a murmur. Whose equipage was more splendid than that of Mrs. Oxenden?—what lady-equestrian displayed more beautiful steeds in the places of public resort than the mistress of the foreign Ambassador? But one day there was alarm and consternation in Hyde Park,—pedestrians running along frantically, with the expectation of beholding some frightful tragedy—equipages moving as quickly as possible out of the way of a steed which was galloping like the whirlwind, and over which the lady-rider appeared to have lost all control. For a while, however, she retained her seat in a manner which proved that though the animal itself was no longer under her restraint, her self-possession was not lost. Thus, for upwards of ten minutes was she borne along with the speed of the hurricane,—until a gate was reached. The animal rushed through it: and by the abruptness of the turn which it thus made, Mrs. Oxenden was thrown off. With terrific violence was she dashed against the masonry of that gate; and those who sped to raise her up, believed that she was dead. But no: the spark of life was not extinct; and she was borne to her splendid mansion,—there to linger on the verge of the grave for a period of many weeks. At length she recovered. Yes—her health was restored; but her beauty was gone. Monstrous ugliness had stamped the countenance which so lately had the power to dazzle, to fascinate, and beguile. Her teeth had been knocked out—her nose was beaten flat—an eye was lost—her forehead and one of her cheeks were horribly scarred. Where was the foreign Ambassador? He had abandoned her. She was surrounded by wealth; and she might still live comfortably, in a pecuniary sense, for the remainder of her existence: but with the loss of her beauty the world's attractions were lost likewise. The terrific disfigurement produced by the accident, filled her with loathing for life. One morning, when her maid entered the chamber, Mrs. Oxenden was found hanging to the bed-post.

The Hon. Wilson Stanhope profited to some little extent by his former painful experiences in the ways of iniquity: the spectacle at Oaklands, and the counsel addressed to him by Queen Indora on that memorable occasion, were not altogether lost upon him. He wrote penitent letters to some influential connexions whom he possessed; and through their medium he obtained a clerkship in one of the Government departments. He abstained from actual crime: he shuddered at the idea of ever again placing himself within reach of the criminal laws: but he could not restrain his habits of extravagance. Debts accumulated, until at length he was arrested and conveyed to the Queen's Bench. Thence he procured his liberation by passing through the Insolvents' Court,—a process for which he forfeited his clerkship. His friends as a last resource procured for him a commission in the Anglo-Turkish Contingent, when that body was raised shortly after the breaking out of the war; and it is to be hoped that the Hon. Wilson Stanhope may in his new position profit more completely than he had previously done by the experiences of his earlier years.

It was gratifying to the King of Inderabad to learn, in the course of time, that his goodness and generosity towards Eveleen O'Brien and Lettice Rodney had not been thrown away. Both of these young women became completely penitent for the past. The former, restored to her family in Ireland, married a young tradesman in good circumstances, but whom she did not deceive in respect to her antecedents. Lettice Rodney, after having for some time dwelt with a humble but respectable family, was wooed by a substantial farmer in the neighbourhood. She likewise dealt candidly with her suitor: but he was enamoured of her—he vowed that he would never allude reproachfully to the past—and she became his wife. We believe that neither the tradesman in Ireland nor the farmer in England have had any reason to repent the marriages which they thus contracted.

Mr. Shadbolt and Madame Angelique were duly tried for the forgeries of which they had been guilty, and were condemned to transportation. Vain was it that the male prisoner proclaimed himself to be of so excellent a character that he was invariably known amongst his acquaintances as "honest Ike Shadbolt:"—vain likewise was it that Madame Angelique went into hysterics and besought the tribunal to have mercy upon a poor friendless Frenchwoman. The evidence was conclusive against them; and they were shipped off to the penal colonies.

We should not omit to state that the Viscount and Viscountess Delorme have occasionally visited England to pass a few weeks with their friends Lord and Lady Octavian Meredith; and that they enjoy the completest happiness. M. Volney died at Madrid, about a year after his daughter's marriage: but Zoe has ever religiously respected the tremendous secret which he revealed to her with regard to the Alpine tragedy.

Mr. Armytage faithfully followed the counsel given to him by Mr. Coleman and Queen Indora to abstain from future speculations. He did not however long survive the tremendous incidents at Oaklands: he died suddenly, of a disease of the heart; and neither his daughter nor his son-in-law had ever the slightest reason to suspect that he had been for so many years acquainted with the fearful guilt of the late Duke of Marchmont—indeed from the very night of its perpetration, as recorded in the earliest chapters of our history.

Jane Barclay—no longer "Crazy Jane," but a rational, sane, and happy woman—presides as housekeeper over the domestic affairs of the mansion in Belgrave Square. It was at her own request that Christian gave her this post; for it would have better suited his inclinations and those of his amiable sister Christina, to have placed in an independent and affluent position the faithful creature whose devotion to the memory of her former mistress had been for a long series of years attended with such melancholy influences for herself. But Jane Barclay desired to dwell beneath the same roof with the son of the deceased Duchess Eliza;—and we need hardly assure the reader that she continues to be the object of the most friendly feelings on the part of the twins whom she so dearly loves.

END OF THE FOURTH SERIES.

POSTSCRIPT.

THE "MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON" are now brought to a conclusion.

Every week, without a single intermission during a period of eight years, has a Number under this title been issued to the public. Its precursor, "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," ranged over a period of four years. For *twelve* years, therefore, have I hebdomadally issued to the world a fragmentary portion of that which, as one vast whole, may be termed an Encyclopedia of Tales. This Encyclopedia consists of twelve volumes, comprising six hundred and twenty-four weekly Numbers. Each Number has occupied me upon an average seven hours in the composition; and therefore no less an amount than four thousand three hundred and sixty-eight hours have been bestowed upon this Encyclopedia of Tales, comprising the four volumes of "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," and the eight volumes of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON." Yet if that amount of hours be reduced to days, it will be found that only a hundred and eighty-two complete days have been absorbed in those publications which have ranged with weekly regularity over a period of twelve years! This circumstance will account to the public for the facility with which I have been enabled to write so many other works during the same period, and yet to allow myself ample leisure for recreation and for healthful exercise.

In respect to the Third and Fourth Series of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON," it may be alleged by some that the title is to a certain degree a misnomer, inasmuch as the incidents which they contain bear slightly any reference to the British Court. But a Royal Court, in the proper acceptance of the term, is limited not to the circle of the Sovereign alone: it includes the aristocracy—the satellites revolving about the central sun. In this sense, therefore, it will be seen that there is no actual misnomer in the titles of the Third and Fourth Series of "THE MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON;" but that they constitute fitting pendants and sequences to the First and Second Series.

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